Sisyphean

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Sisyphean

by Nerve_Itch

Summary

"For as long as you convince yourself that I am the puppeteer of your actions, you will be treated accordingly."

Winding a hazardous path through Europe, Hannibal is still trying to coax potential out of Will, baiting him with kindnesses to counter the cruelties he lavishes on him.

Will clings to justifications as to why he hasn't turned Hannibal in yet. He won't call for help, and it's not because he's scared; that he knows that Hannibal would all but smell the betrayal on him the moment he acted on it. It's not even that he knows he'd be first to be thrown into the crosshairs that would find them, no matter how sincerely Hannibal assures him that he wishes him to be a living thing by his side.

It's that it's a long game with indecipherable rules - but the longer Will delays its conclusion, the more unwanted players they attract.

[A continuation of the Black Mirror story - but all necessary context is provided]

Introduction

“The reports of your death are somewhat underwhelming.”

Will is sat in the window of a small café in Poznan, the weak spring sunshine illuminating the raised scarring of his cheek. He absorbs Hannibal’s words in silence, sipping at the bittersweet coffee and hissing softly as the heat rolls through fresh cuts inside his mouth. He’s learnt that nothing is to be gained from asking; the tablet showing the reports of his demise belongs to Hannibal. The finance that affords them their coffees and dinners and slow travel through Europe, evading the authorities and seeking something that only Hannibal knows; that all belongs to Hannibal too. Explanation will be shared if, or when, Hannibal wills it.

If Will is to benefit from any of it, he’s been told, he has to acknowledge his newfound dependency. Hannibal no longer considers that Will is supposed to be catching him, bringing him in. According to Hannibal, if anyone is caught, it’s Will, and it’s up to Will to accept that.

Specifically, Will is to accept the leash around his neck and decide how best to deal with it. The transition of the leash from a figurative construct to a very real leather loop sitting warm against his throat, concealed beneath the buttons of his shirt, has not provided much clarity on the matter.

“It seems you have been painted as little more than an overly curious victim of inevitable circumstance” Hannibal continues, concealed in shadows and not raising his eyes from the screen, his mouth curling in mild distaste. “It would be terrible to prove these ill-informed words right, wouldn’t you think?”

“Terrible” Will agrees, trying to smile at the waiter as he’s offered a refill for his cup, letting his face fall into a calm neutral as the young man recoils and splashes the table with the liquid. The waiter keeps his eyes away from Will’s scars as he dabs the coffee with a paper napkin, muttering words Will can’t understand in a tone too affronted to be an apology.

Will is still adjusting to the way he’s regarded; like something damaged and discomforting. Like a warning. His skin will heal, and the ragged pinks and reds of his cheek will subside to something muted; a trail of lines shimmering opaque, and Will wonders if, as his face recovers, it will leave him with the impression of tears etched into his skin.

“Ms Lounds has yet to report on your alleged departure from this world” says Hannibal, a welcome interruption to Will’s morose introspection. Self-pity has done nothing to aid him thus far and it’s too wasteful a use of his energy. No strategy in feeling sorry for what’s unavoidable. He’s being studied by the inscrutable gaze of Hannibal, the tablet now folded inside its leather casing.

“Probably because she’s waiting for the proof of my rotting bones before she believes it” Will answers, his eyes resting on the colourful buildings across the square. “She’s had a lot of

resurrections to process; she might be trying to use them sparingly."

Hannibal smiles; knows that Will has confessed his belief that he'll be alive for the foreseeable future.

Will keeps his own smile flattened against his teeth, and turns his stare on the waiting staff sharing awkward laughter at the back of the café. The two of them; the man who'd served him and the young woman with him; they look away, sheepish, and Will accepts the probability that he was the subject of their entertainment. They're young, barely twenty. It doesn't sting him, their casual reaction to something they don't understand. He finds himself envious of the naivety that lets them laugh at misfortune, rather than view it a fearful and unavoidable condition of survival.

"I believe it more likely that the fairer Verger has been in touch with her, and that Ms Lounds' assumptions may be more attuned to our reality than those of our European news sources."

There are many words Will would attribute to Margot, but fair is not one of them.

Hannibal follows the path of Will's gaze as it returns to their table.

"Which would suggest that she is waiting for a moment more opportune to reveal her suspicions. I imagine we should be grateful that such a moment has yet to occur."

Will resists the urge to blow on the surface of his coffee to cool it. There's a calmness to Hannibal's mood that he doesn't want to rankle; not with something as pithy as poor manners. He nods instead, letting the heat of the drink burn into his cheeks.

"That resentment you keep so tightly coiled inside you will be doing nothing to aid your recovery" Hannibal tells him, skimming a finger beneath Will's jaw to direct his attention more fully. A soft gesture, and one of implicit dominance.

Will says nothing of the other afflictions causing him issue with his recovery; fresh abrasions from cords pulled too tight on his skin, then held there until Will admitted that he'd wanted it, too; scratches running across and through him from contraptions hinting at more cruelty than Hannibal would deem tasteful; and the lack of any sleep not punctuated by intrusions that he only sometimes denied were welcome.

Will's hand slides protectively over the curve of severed skin in his gut, recently re-stitched, and supposes that he did ask for these things, really. Most of them, perhaps. If only to avoid the absence of any kind of anchor, even if it's an anchor he knows he needs to upend in time. Will's fingers press into a crescent of broken skin by his hips; an old mark from Matthew and recently reclaimed by Hannibal, and allows the smallest of smiles to cut the ice of the air around them.

"Not resentful" he offers, and it's a half truth. An appeasement. "Anxious, maybe."

"Then you must unwind. Poznan has remarkable history embedded within its buildings. Wander, Will. Take in some scenery beyond that which already lies within your skull."

“You’re letting me off the lead?” Will asks, and he’d meant it as a figure of speech, but the reality pushes heat into his cheeks. Hannibal takes a long sip of his drink and allows Will long seconds to adjust to his discomfort at the admission.

“Some hours apart would benefit us both” Hannibal answers, smiling.

“Some hours apart will probably require money to explore the city” counters Will, positing it as a rational statement, rather than something pleading.

“I’d thought you more resourceful than that” answers Hannibal, and again there’s the expectation of behaviour that Will keeps failing to meet. It sits heavy in his bones.

“It’s preferable to *ask* you instead of skimming through your wallet when you leave to use the bathroom” Will tells him.

“Then ask.”

Will chews at the inside of his lip as though tasting the indignity that he has yet to speak.

“Can I have some money, please?” he asks, quiet but keeping eye contact. He feels childlike with the words and all but squirms from the indignity of it.

“For what return?” Hannibal counters.

Will sighs and lets his shoulders sag heavy on his frame.

“Stop it” Will tells him, sounding tired. Beaten down. “Stop doing this” he repeats, feeling control leaving his senses with the quickening pace of his voice. “You don’t *want* this. You don’t *want* me to be a simpering burden on your time and…resources. Stop treating me like…this.”

Hannibal remains cautiously amused by Will’s words, making no move to stop him or interrupt. Seconds pass by in cool silence until he smiles openly at Will.

“For as long as you convince yourself that I am the puppeteer of your actions, you will be treated accordingly.”

Will bristles, and catches his frustrations in a breath which he eases out through his teeth.

Hannibal continues, a hand resting on the shoulder of Will’s shirt with a finger nudging at the leather beneath it. Enough to pull the contact a microdistance closer to Will’s uneasy swallow.

“I’d much prefer you to act like the warrior I know you to be” Hannibal tells him. “From you, I would accept it. Fall prey to it, perhaps.”

Will slides a hand against Hannibal’s jacket in a gesture of acquiescence. He doesn’t believe that Hannibal could be prey to anything less than his own ego, and he fears that he’s striving to become an extension of this and little more. His fingers glean over the soft leather of Hannibal’s wallet, lifting it softly out of the deep pocket, while his other hand reaches to

wrap around Hannibal's shoulder. The awkward demonstration of affection does nothing to deter Hannibal from his cold whispered words.

"But I would be false if I were to say that I found no beauty in the way you suffer for me so terribly. You can hardly blame me for indulging a gift you so willingly give."

Hannibal's hands find Will's wrist at the moment that he drops the wallet back into the woollen pocket. Will smiles, eyes sparking. It was a small challenge, and he'd risen to it. He allows Hannibal a short moment to believe that he's failed it, too.

"I'll find you before evening" Will assures him, peeling his arms from Hannibal and revealing the folded Euros tucked inside his fist as he backs out of the café.

Hannibal's expression is one of mild surprise, indignation and pride.

As Will walks through the square, towards the tunnels and churches of the town's preserved heritage, he knows that he won't use the money lifted from Hannibal's wallet to purchase a throwaway phone. He knows that he won't hole up in an internet café, researching contact details for Kade Prurnell and the Bureau, that he won't send them a message saying that he knows where their fugitive can be found, or that he's travelling with him as a hostage. He won't use the money to run; he knows he wouldn't get far before he was caught up to.

He keeps his eyes lower as he walks, deferring toward those who catch themselves staring at the slow-healing slices on his face.

He won't call for help, and it's not because he's scared; that he knows Hannibal would all but smell the betrayal on him the moment he acted on it. It's not even that he knows that despite Hannibal's assurances that he prefers Will to be a living thing by his side, that he'd be the first to be thrown into the crosshairs that would find them.

It's that this would be too short a game and Will's not sure that he's ready for it to end.

Hannibal is already too tightly entwined with his thoughts; he's baiting Will with dehumanising behaviour in order to coax the monster out instead. He's using petty humilations to goad a greater reaction and, Will realises, as his slowly measured footsteps guide him away from the town, it's in this that Hannibal is showing his weakness.

Hannibal *wants* Will to overcome him.

And it won't be until Will can do this – fully, and given their current dynamic, indecently – that he can finally make Hannibal yield to him. Bring him in, with the least chance of damning retribution to himself.

This game, he knows, is a longer one, and more dangerous for it. And he's never been good at winning, per se, but he has to try.

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Instinct

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's late afternoon when the novelty of freedom from Hannibal shifts into an abstract kind of guilt. There's a haze of orange light from the dipping sun, and the diffusion of glow lends the view of the lake an almost holy appearance. Will turns his back on it, as though not wanting to permit himself too much indulgence, and begins retracing his steps through the greenery and into the cobbles, back to willing confinement. Back to Hannibal, and the wood-furnished apartment that has kept him contained these past days.

He's still shaking out the images of the Polish town and its imposing churches, once ruined by war and then rebuilt in their former image. It had reminded him too much of Dresden, and by extension, of what he'd lost there. He still tries to stop his thoughts when they return to Matthew, lest they remind him that what he misses is not the person, not anymore. Not after the cruelties shared between the sparse softness, and the final one that saw the orderly confined to some nameless hospital, gathering the fragments of his mind together. What he misses from Matthew is nothing so sentimental as affection; it's simply the loss of a clearer barometer of morality to measure himself against.

The residue of long lost battles follows Will as he walks back through the old town, absently scratching at the leather around his neck but not considering at any point that he could remove it.

His bones feel tired, like a weight being carried inside his skin more dense than just marrow. There's been no medicated reprieve since Hannibal chose to withhold his painkillers some days ago, and the strain of his movements against his damaged parts wears at him. He finds his way to the outside door of their apartment, and it still feels wrong, this place. It's dilapidated, from the outside, but too contemporary to match Hannibal. It lacks grandiosity; nestled on the ground floor with no accessible basements or staircases in the living space. Just wooden flooring, wide curtained windows with bars on the outside, and little furniture beyond the functional. There's no protective driveway between them and the street. There's an uncomfortable lack of privacy, but Hannibal has made the space his own already, and given no indication of the means he'd used to acquire it. Will tries the handle and finds it locked. Having a key would presumably afford Will too much freedom.

He wilts against the doorframe, giving his lungs and muscles a chance to recover before he knocks. Asking for anything, even entrance to the building they share, feels like an effort.

It's a full minute before the sound of movement rises from inside the building, and a further two until Hannibal pulls the heavy door open, welcoming Will as though he were a guest rather than his keep.

"Please, come in."

Will steps across the threshold, and is greeted by the sight of a floor covered in thick plastic sheeting. Instinct assures him that this has nothing to do with decorating.

“His name is Skotte” Hannibal tells Will, as thin smudges of wet red on the sheeting become visible as he moves further into the wide living room.

Will closes his eyes before moving any closer.

“He was explaining that he does not see any merit or beauty in mutilation. I am perhaps being rather more persuasive in my argument against his viewpoint.”

There’s a sound of rustling plastic, and a stifled protest.

Will keeps his eyes focused on the ground as he walks forward, careful to keep his footing steady on the ridges of sheeting.

If he looks up, it’ll be real.

“It seems that some find it easier to disconnect from truths when they have no experience to relate them to” Hannibal continues.

Will’s gaze rests on the base of one of their two wooden dining chairs, and of the bare ankles tied to its front legs.

There’s hardly any point in hiding from the inevitability of what he’s about to see. There’s even less point in pointing out that what Hannibal has just described is equally applicable to the man’s own selective approach to empathy.

Will takes in the rest of the image assembled by Hannibal. The boy; man, perhaps, but barely, is the same face that he saw in the café. The uncomfortable, vaguely sullen and wilfully naïve face that had recoiled from the sight of Will’s face earlier in the day, only now his expression is contorted by terror and by three red stripes running parallel from the bottom of his eye to the cloth gag holding him mute.

Will reaches his hand to his own stomach by way of protection; as though all wounds inflicted by Hannibal could reopen just because he wills it, and as though his hand alone could stop it.

Hannibal smiles from behind the shaking body, gripping a short knife in his hand and holding it above the boy’s bare chest. He looks as though he’s waiting for Will to provide him with directions.

“Easier to see things when they’re shown on a new surface, isn’t it?” asks Hannibal.

Will’s mouth is dry. His throat feels tense behind the curl of leather, and his skin feels too hot.

For all he’s reconstructed Hannibal’s acts of murder behind his eyes, seen his violence when it’s been borne of impulse and fury, and for all he’s felt the softer edges of his cruelty when turned on his own skin in their most intimate moments, this is still new.

This is horribly, awfully new.

The scent of blood mingles with piss and Will tries, so hard, to stop himself from empathising with the terror of this bloodied creature held at Hannibal's mercy.

If Will pities him, he dooms himself.

If he pities this boy, he's showing that he is nothing more than the cattle Hannibal disperses for doing no more than looking at someone without ample respect.

Pity sets him apart from the predatory being Hannibal would see him as, and pity keeps him in touch with the crumbling vestiges of his humanity; the remains that seem to weaken with each day spent in Hannibal's presence.

Will opens his eyes and meets the deep brown stare of the boy tethered to the chair, sees the pleas in his pink-rimmed eyes, and grimaces.

Hannibal gestures to the small desk by the front window; formerly his writing desk, but now adorned with four knives of differing lengths and widths. Will has only felt the edge of one of them against his own skin these last weeks, and suspects that whatever touches he felt from it were considerably easier to bear than any gifted to the boy.

Will reminds himself that those marks on his own skin were invited, and hushes the tiny voice that hums through his brain and adds *mostly*. *Sort of.* His pity serves no purpose, whoever it's directed at.

"I'm giving Skotte here a chance to embrace his new physicality. To live with it, and learn that it's not as abhorrent as he first believed" Hannibal says calmly, moving to stand near Will and face the muted, shaking figure on the chair.

"Poetic, no?" he asks Will, gracing blood-wet fingertips over the back of Will's neck and resting his mouth in Will's hair, inhaling.

"Most people prefer their poetry with words, not knives" answers Will, still staring at the boy. He can feel hatred radiating from the doomed creature staring at him, hot and foul.

"Most people are tedious in that regard" says Hannibal, withdrawing his hold from Will and walking through to the kitchen.

The boy growls through the gag and Will wonders what plea, what bargain anyone could possibly hope to strike in his position.

He's not sure if he admires the boy's perseverance or finds it embarrassing in its futility.

Hannibal returns with damp, clean hands and his shirt sleeves buttoned back down. He's avoided getting any blood on his clothes.

"The terms of Skotte's freedom are conditional, of course" Hannibal continues, reaching for a jacket from the coat stand by the door. "He's already been told. There's a challenge" he says, and he's addressing Will, not the boy.

“This is less like poetry and more like a cat with a shrew in its teeth” says Will, not moving from his place until he’s clear on what’s expected of him. Hannibal passes him – and the table of knives – on his way to the boy.

“Skotte can leave” Hannibal says, resting his hands on the boy’s shoulders, “but only if he goes through you.”

Will’s gut lurches with the understanding that Hannibal’s habit of coaxing murder out of him by dangling his life as bait for others has yet to be extinguished.

“Kill or be killed. Really, Hannibal?”

Will feels pity rearing inside him again, with the knowledge that the wretched creature on the chair doesn’t stand a chance. Not against the situation he’s been put in.

The boy in the chair is not a killer, and yet Hannibal would make him one, if only to prove a point.

Will is already standing by the table of knives – only three on it, now – before Hannibal has placed the wooden handle of the fourth in the now untied hands of the boy.

“It’s him or you” Hannibal tells the room, navigating the creases of the plastic sheeting on the floor with lightning grace, his jacket on and hand on the door before Will has opportunity or inclination to answer him.

The boy bends over, tucking the knife between the cloth ties on his ankles and pulling himself free. He’s careful not to nick his skin with the blade, and he’s not looking at Will.

By now, Will could have crossed the few feet of empty space and planted a blade in the back of his spine. Ended it. Instead, he stands. Waits until his violence becomes necessary and wonders if this way is more cruel, for giving the boy a chance at hope.

The boy cuts the gag from his face and shouts in pain as the cloth tears the congealed blood from his skin.

Now, he’s staring.

Now, he’s something feral; something new created by Hannibal’s hand, formed only to be destroyed by Will.

“I’m sorry” the boy spits, as though words as simple as that could save him.

“So am I” answers Will, knowing that words like these never could.

Will steels himself, trusting that his muscle memory will fill in what his mind tries to forget. The boy lunges across the plastic sheeting, tripping at Will’s feet and dragging them both down. The knife in the boy’s hand doesn’t look like a threat, in the same way that the one in Will’s hand doesn’t feel like a weapon.

“I don’t want to” says the boy, his English broken but clear. It’s not until Will’s back is flush against the floor and there’s a knife pointed at his throat that he considers moving more defensively.

He doesn’t listen to the thought in his head that’s asking him why he’s treating this like gameplay. Like foreplay.

“*You* don’t want to” says the boy, knife hesitating over skin, but Will’s fist is in his face and it’s shutting down the words.

Will is fairly certain that what he *wants* is not entirely relevant. He’s clutching at the boy’s knife hand, and he expected himself to be weaker, somehow; worn down by the low thrum of pain that runs through him at a constant, and from the bruises bitten into him by teeth and metal. Instead, he finds his grip on the boy’s wrist, finds it strong enough to break it, and feels the pop of bone against the palm of his hand. The shriek of pain echoes dimly in the room until Will registers that they’re too exposed, in this house. Too close to the street for so much noise.

Will forces the boy’s mouth closed behind his hand, buckles him against the floor. He’s thrashing; all wire limbs and more energy than in Will’s perfunctory movements, and yet all he manages to do is kick. The boy’s other hand reaches his dropped knife but the angle’s all wrong; he’s facing the floor and he’s twisting his arm behind him and this feels too *easy* for Will. It feels the way he imagined the ripper felt, wresting the life from those unfortunate enough to cross his path, and Will can’t shake the feeling, the comparison, from under his skin.

He almost wishes there were more of a fight, that his actions could be more of a reaction, A tipping of the scales and not a calm acceptance that this was never *supposed* to be a challenge, for him.

The boy twists; coiled and on the ground, but now he’s facing Will and it seems like a fairer fight, with his mouth away from Will’s damp hand and with eye contact searing the air around them. As though anything the boy could communicate would have any effect on the outcome.

Will waits for a beat; wonders if he’s hoping the boy might actually succeed and he’d be done trying to pretend he’s not the monster he started out trying to catch.

The knife seems to soar; a sheen of metal skimming the collar of Will’s shirt and all Will does to stop it is hold his hands at the boy’s throat. He feels the pressure of the blade at the front of his collar; pressing into unyielding leather, and Will’s thumbs are in the indents of the boy’s neck, the pulse drifting out of him before he’s done any more damage than cut the fabric of his shirt.

The knife slips and falls with a shirt button; Will’s own blade already discarded, and the boy stares; stares as though he’s seeing what Will really is. Sees the lack of apology or conscience, sees the front of the exposed leather collar, and his brown eyed stare registers something like comprehension before it turns glassy, and empty, and the movement beneath Will’s fingertips stills.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter updates may be sporadic due to rubbish internet and rubbisher health, but I'm aiming to have this story finished by the beginning of June (I am slow). Filth will commence on the next update...

Thank you for reading!

Impact

Chapter Notes

This is not a reckoning.

[Also, filth.]

There's a dull ache in Will's thighs from how long he's been kneeling on the ground, the folds in the plastic sheeting imprinting ridges into his knees through his trousers.

The body beneath his hands hasn't revived and its skin is growing cooler, lumpen and clay-like under Will's touch.

The ugliness of the boy's death sits heavy in Will's skin, the phantom stilling pulse reverberating through his fingertips as he strokes hair from the boy's eyes. He's still waiting for the feeling of power to manifest and eclipse it, but nothing comes.

He's just looking at a poor dead guy with a cut up face, and he's kneeling over him like a prayer for resurrection.

Take this body away.

Take the responsibility for this away.

Take me away.

Will knows he's wasting the time he has apart from Hannibal for the second time today. He knows he should be using each precious minute to find ways to protect himself from his circumstances; to find the keys to the locked cabinet in the bedroom which holds his meds; to sabotage the tools that Hannibal uses against him so intimately; or at least to gather his thoughts to cogency.

Somehow, with a body growing cold and stiff and needing to be disposed of, it's not a priority.

He's still resting his hands on the clammy skin, as if seeking a connection of sorts; between the violence and the aftermath, or perhaps a thread of empathy that might have run through two networks of veins, enough to have avoided such an outcome.

Will unfolds his legs from underneath him and pulls his hands back to his own skin, stilling a thin tremble, but he can't pull his stare from the opaque blanks looking out of the dead boy's face.

He wonders if he's in shock, and thinks that, of all the things he's endured, this is a comparatively minor trigger for such a reaction. He's barely scratched from the experience; his knuckles have yet to swell, and his fingers reach the open triangle of his own shirt where the boy – he still won't afford him his name, even if he knows it – pressed his knife and peeled a button from the fabric.

There's nothing; no new scuff indented into his skin.

It's unusual; to have fought and sustained no damage.

He strokes the back of his neck to ease tension out of him, holds his fingers against the leather of the collar and for a long second feels the space between his skin and the grip of it as an absence. Like he's expecting it to be trying to choke him. He ignores the soft disappointment that it doesn't.

Will registers a sound of clicking catches and of a jacket being shed, and stares expectantly at the still body before his thoughts return to the rational.

"I am not sure you could argue self-defence if his body were to be discovered."

The appearance of Hannibal's pragmatism is soothing, and Will looks up to check that he hasn't imagined him; that he's not a manifestation of a conscience he'd thought himself deaf to.

Hannibal is real, composed, and holding a fabric bag with plumes of vegetables and Will wishes he could laugh at the ridiculousness of it all; the accompaniments for the feast begat by murder. And he wonders if Hannibal had chosen any special complimentary dish that would have suited Will's meat, had he not been the victor.

"I had anticipated more mess," Hannibal adds, taking the groceries through to the small kitchen, and the domesticity of it seems more sincere than any panicked unravelling of Will's mind. There's fury coiling through the uncertainty, and this is something Will can cling to. Something he can put on Hannibal; the indignation of it all; the manipulation, so ostentatious and thorough.

"He didn't need to die," Will tells him as Hannibal begins gathering the corners of plastic sheeting from the far edge of the room.

"No," replies Hannibal. "But that could be said of anyone; death is not a necessity. It simply is."

"And yet." Will doesn't have enough coherency in him to make an effective rebuke and he feels more dumb, more useless than ever.

"And you did not need to kill him," Hannibal supplies, a few feet of the plastic now bunched around the boy's stiff, splayed body. "I suggest you stand, Will, if you do not wish to be gathered and processed in the same manner as Skotte."

Will stands, absently obedient as Hannibal bends, and assembles his response.

It takes a second for the impulse to manifest; he throws his fist hard at the underside of Hannibal's jaw as he straightens up. Hannibal doesn't stagger; only holds his jaw and regards Will with an expression that looks hopeful. Will can't decide whether Hannibal's reactions are simply that fast, or if his actions were expected. Neither seems to matter.

He lunges across the body and his hands reach for Hannibal's neck as Hannibal reaches for his forearms.

"I suggest we leave the rest of the sheeting in place if we are to continue our conversation in this manner," says Hannibal, Will's thumbs struggling for purchase as he's held at bay.

"This isn't supposed to be a game" spits Will, freeing his arms and grabbing instead at Hannibal's shoulders as though trying to shake the levity from his tone. "He was a *kid*."

Hannibal pushes forward, his grip on Will keeping him from tripping backwards over the body, until they're stood firm on the plastic.

"And yet you killed him," Hannibal says, accepting the second punch to his face with infuriating grace. "You had a choice, Will," he adds, and he's clicking his jaw and checking the alignment of his teeth with his tongue.

"Choice." The word sits bitter in Will's mouth, full of sourness and resentment. "Kill or let him kill me? That choice?"

Will fixes his posture to attack again and it's swallowed by Hannibal pulling him in close; too close. An embrace to still his arms and cradle his head. Not to diffuse the anger, but to remind Will how easily it can be rendered ineffectual.

"You had plenty of choice," Hannibal tells him. Will is struggling in his hold, but less violently now, with his chin hooked over Hannibal's left shoulder and an arm folded across his back to hold him secure. "You could have set him free."

Will stills in his grip, his arms hanging uselessly by his side.

"You could have assured him that he didn't need to kill. Who would have stopped you? I was gone by then."

"You told him he had to," Will says, quiet. "You put the knife in his hand and told him to kill me."

"And you took that knife out of his hand," Hannibal reminds him. "With what looks like very little effort."

"I couldn't have just set him free," Will says, and Hannibal is ahead of him when it comes to questioning why he's trying to justify it, now.

"But it is only now that you are considering that it could have been an option."

Will clutches at Hannibal's shirt, for leverage or for something intangible that he thinks he's been conditioned to seek.

“Don’t.”

Hannibal pulls back, inches only, so their foreheads meet.

“Were you worried that he may find us? Report us? Because that would have endangered me, not you. Not if you’d been clever with it.”

Hannibal’s eyes are dark, warm, showing a kindness that doesn’t belong with his softly spoken assessment.

“Or did you not consider even that? You acted on your intuition, Will.”

Will feels his resolve dampened, disintegrated. He’d followed only his impulse, and his actions followed the path he knew better than any other.

To kill.

Hannibal smiles with teeth as the realisation paints Will’s face open, mortified.

–

“I imagine you would still like to believe that it was my influence that guided you to this point,” Hannibal tells Will, his hands curling around his shoulders. “That it’s my hold on you that steered your hand to that poor man’s throat.”

Hannibal’s fingers dip beneath the fabric of Will’s shirt and slip into the gap between the leather collar and his skin, pulling a stoppered breath from Will.

“You’d take comfort in that,” Hannibal tells him, pulling tighter.

Will breathes out a denial; a soft stuttering breath that contradicts his body’s reaction; he feels the tug in his gut before it reaches anywhere else and he tries to divert the anger he feels at himself onto Hannibal.

“You’d hate that,” Will spits.

Hannibal smiles, no teeth this time.

“I’m not the monster you wrought made flesh,” he says as Hannibal’s grip loosens and his hands move to Will’s trousers.

Will isn’t sure if he’s speaking in defence or as a seduction.

His hands reach for Hannibal’s belt, unclasping and pulling and racing to undo him faster than the action can be returned. It’s anger that he’s feeling, still, and yet it’s coming out in the

only way he knows he can express it with a modicum of safety. And because this way, he might see more of the mask slipping than if he just tries to punch it from Hannibal's face.

Either option seems appealing.

"You're more than that," Hannibal agrees, and the gentleness between them feels like the space between lightning and the thunderclap.

He's not sure that he's ready to convince Hannibal, not yet. Not while he's still unclear on what he's trying to convince him of. He yanks the belt down so that Hannibal's trousers slide enough to hamper the movement of his thighs, and he shoves him at the waist.

"Prove it?" says Hannibal as his back thuds against the floor and for a glorious moment, he looks useless; undignified and immobilised, an invitee to his actions rather than the orchestrator.

Will expects to feel powerful at the sight. He crouches over Hannibal, careful to bend himself in a way that won't stretch his stomach and allowing himself some care to his own movements, for once. He splays his thighs to pin Hannibal beneath him and looks at his erection like it's something irrelevant, presses Hannibal's wrists into the plastic sheeting, leans across his chest and kisses the bruise of his jaw with teeth.

The feeling of power has yet to materialise and Will *knows* this is only a distraction from guilt and self-awareness. He pushes it back into the duller corners of his mind, but he's already feeling Hannibal reacting to his hesitancy. There's resistance beneath his grip and Hannibal feels like a stretched band ready to snap back at him if he lets go.

Will can only do this if he doesn't speak. Doesn't betray his thoughts. Without Hannibal stoppering his mouth with devices, with damp hands or just commands, Will only has resolve to guide him, and he's been so long without having to administer control to himself that it feels new again under his skin.

He bites at Hannibal's mouth and as his movements are reciprocated, he's careful to bite back harder; to push his thumbs into the scar tissue of Hannibal's wrist and scratch fresh lines into the skin there with his nails. Nothing that will last; but Hannibal hums a breath into Will's mouth and his back lifts off the floor to press against Will's chest.

Even through the fabric, there's enough sweat for a dampness that isn't all Will's to permeate through to his skin.

Hannibal *likes* this.

Will bites at his ear, slides his tongue across the ridges and the hollow in a way that feels like a rehearsal and he's doubting himself again; knows that he's playing at undoing the man beneath him and no amount of thinning breath is bolstering him enough to do what he needs to do to make this *work*.

There are two knives within reach, and Will wonders if it would be cheating to resort to weapons. Hannibal stares at him, and it's reverent but curious, looking to Will as though

deciding whether his control could be relinquished to such small gestures.

Even eye contact could undo this. Hannibal's silence adds to the fragility of the dynamic; as though if he speaks he'd convey his inherent superiority and Will can't tell how much of this speculation is based in fact and how much of it is wishful thinking. He climbs across Hannibal, turning him onto his front with a clumsiness which betrays his uncertainty. He hides it; grips onto Hannibal's hair and tugs his head back so his throat forms a convex curve, spits on his fingers and pushes one into the cleft of Hannibal's cheeks.

"Will."

Will doesn't know how to bend Hannibal with his words, not in situations like this. Not with his own erection feeling like something simply *functional*; another tool for strategy and not something fully belonging to him.

Not speaking, not answering Hannibal, is worse than saying the wrong thing. He spits again; curls his finger across the ridges of skin and pushes the tip of his finger in.

There's not much of a contraction around it; as though Hannibal is relaxing around him too easily. Like he's more expectant than aroused.

Will wishes he could shut his brain down and follow the impulses which had earlier led him to squeeze the tubes of a boy's neck shut.

His sensory memory guides him and now he's pushing his thumb against Hannibal's opening; imagines that he's choking him in negative and massages, presses and curls until muscles flex against him.

"Will…"

It's spoken like a warning, this time, choked through Hannibal's strained neck. Will hesitates; slackens the grip on Hannibal's hair and feels a pulse that's not his own.

The contact pulls away from his fingers as Hannibal presses himself into the floor and unlatches his head from Will's grasp.

Will knows that even by allowing this, he's lost. As though all of these interactions were only ever battles, and he's yet to find an armour that fits.

He tries, still; presses himself down onto Hannibal, using his weight to push him down and reaches his fingers back to where Hannibal flinches and pulls back.

Hannibal twists an arm behind him, snake-like and precise, and Will's unhooked again. Hannibal's grip on his forearm is strong but Will can't admit how much of this is him *allowing* Hannibal to undermine him, again.

Will's pulling at the back of Hannibal's shirt for balance and his fingers can't tuft the fabric enough to keep himself in place. He's dragged by one arm on his and he's rolled onto his back, Hannibal folding over him.

“Not yet,” Hannibal tells him, simply. As though it’s a right he has yet to earn.

“Fuck you.”

The spittle from Will’s mouth glistens, adding a shimmer to Hannibal’s cheeks as it lands. He’s pushing Hannibal off him, trying to prove that he’s not so easily defeated. His strength is still sporadic; still unravelled by a twist at the wrong angle or a pull at unhealed muscles, and the tension in his arms sends a spasm running through his back at the exact moment that Hannibal’s open hand swipes hard against the cut side of his face.

“No,” says Hannibal, and he looks so damn *pleased* with himself that Will wants to pulverise the skin against his bones. He settles instead for kissing the smile from his face, but it’s nothing like tenderness. It’s consumption, and loathing, and hunger, and he doesn’t know when he started thinking that any of this was okay.

Hannibal pushes Will back down, pressing the heel of his hand across the open triangle of shirt and curling his fingers beneath the collar, enough to pull it into a bite.

“Not until you want to,” Hannibal tells him, using his other hand to pull the opening of Will’s trousers lower, lips curled downwards as Will reaches to pull the buttons of Hannibal’s shirt off with short fierce yanks. It’s antagonism, now. It’s petty retaliations which bely his physical deference. He knows Hannibal liked this shirt; spent too long picking it out, knowing that he’d have to limit his luxury as they moved through these temporary cities and spaces. There’s satisfaction in ruining it, but it’s a weak comparison against the consequences it will inevitably earn him.

Hannibal curls back; pulls Will’s shoes and trousers off, then his socks, smiling at the way Will can’t sit up quickly from his position, not without pulling too sharp at his stitches. He strokes at the pink lines of scarring hidden by coarse leg hair and fixes a stare at Will that looks like a promise.

“You’ll stitch those back on later,” Hannibal tells him. “It’s a skill that you’d benefit from learning,” he adds, and Will can’t tell if the threat of things needing new stitches is sincere, or if it’s another small way of undoing him. Either way, he’s feeling a hollowness in his bones and a hunger that’s steadily rendering him pliant. He ignores that one of the buttons has landed on the chest of the now cold body only feet from where they’re grappling, and he ignores the curiosity as to how many times murder has served as foreplay. He lets Hannibal manoeuvre his legs apart, and he’s holding Will in such a way that there’s nothing Will can do to reciprocate, other than accept. He’d hate how quickly and completely he’s dismantled, but there’s a willingness in him to keep giving in that he’s not ready to overcome. That it might hurt to acknowledge it doesn’t matter as much as the strain in his legs as Hannibal grips at his thighs and shunts them upward in a way that has Will curling back on himself.

No matter what resentments Will wants to direct at Hannibal, he’s grateful for the way he can obliterate the emotional detritus that clogs his thoughts, and that he can do it with something as simple and inelegant as pain and arousal.

There’s a hot mouth at his entrance and Hannibal’s nose pressing against him, catching hairs that tickle as he moves his head, tongue pushing *at* him, *into* him in gradients, and already

Will is gripping the folds of plastic sheet in his fists to hold his posture taut, to give him enough balance to push back onto Hannibal's mouth. It's a slow, creeping pressure; strong enough to strain at the muscles but delivered with a delicacy that moves unpredictably. The next noise to come out of Will's throat is a whimper and he bites it back with a curse; ashamed to be acquiescing so completely. As he gives way to the tongue completely, he understands that this is Hannibal one-upping him; showing him that his earlier efforts using just *fingers* were clumsy somehow. Inadequate. He squirms, and he's held rigid; digits pressing into the threads of tendons in his thighs that still ache from earlier interactions with less moveable restraints than just hands.

He's grateful, he thinks, that they're not in the bedroom this time. That there are no tools at hand, unless he counts the knives.

He stops thinking as Hannibal pulls his tongue away; out; blows a thin stream of air into him that cools when it hits the damp skin.

Fuck.

He feels teeth at the softest edges of his balls, and it's a small nip, a warning, and Will realises he spoke the curse out loud. He bites onto his lip to keep himself from leaking another.

There's stillness, for two heavy breaths, enough for an edge of fear to tilt Will's erection closer to his stomach. Then there's a tongue inside him again; coarse and moving faster and Hannibal hums an appreciation. The vibrations from the noise thrum into him, and Will has his hands bunched so tight in the plastic, dragging its edges toward him, that his knuckles heat from the effort of trying to keep himself together. As he pulls at the sheeting there's a crash of the wooden chair falling over some feet from his head, and the short cloth tethers scattering around the base in the periphery of Will's vision. None of the cloth ties have enough length in them to be of use and Will wonders if he's relieved or disappointed.

He's not sure how he thought he could ever have bested Hannibal.

The movement inside him sings through his nerves like low pulses of electricity and he bites onto his lip again to stop another expletive from spilling out. His back throbs from the angle he's in, and it's reassuring, having the discomfort bordering on pain, always there to temper any bliss he might be close to.

Hannibal's mouth slides and he's licking, lighter now, tongue brushing through hair and to the underside of Will's balls. Will releases his grip on the floor and moves his hands down to catch Hannibal by the hair, to pull his face closer to his cock, to get his mouth on him where he can finish what he's starting. He feels strong, this way; with the bristles of Hannibal's hair tufted in his hands, and his face nestled between his legs, and losing doesn't feel so bad when it works like this.

Hannibal licks at the damp tip of Will's cock; once only, and viper-quick.

"No."

The breath from the word resonates warm across the tip, stilling the thread of nerves so close to the surface and ready to be pulled out.

“Why not?” asks Will and he didn’t mean for it to come out so breathy and petulant.

His legs are pushed to the ground, still splayed, and his spine unfurls as he’s allowed some movement. He pulls Hannibal over him, nuzzles at the jaw as a reminder that he’s not as weak as Hannibal’s treating him, not when *he caused damage too*.

Hannibal slides one hand behind Will’s head, cradling it from the hardness of the floor, using the other to lean his palm into Will’s chest, his smallest finger nudging beneath the shirt fabric at skin recently parted and not deep enough to be stitched.

“You know why.”

The leather collar tightens with Hannibal’s grip on it and Will can’t say anything more eloquent than a reluctant *yes*.

“Open your shirt, Will.”

The tension in him subsides to a bearable level as he focuses on the parochial; obeys Hannibal’s instruction and undoes each button from his shirt carefully, eyes flitting from his buttonholes to Hannibal’s incalculable gaze. He lets it fall open, knows he’s unwrapping the covering of an arsenal of injuries, the worst still curved into his gut like a grimace. Hannibal’s smiling now, satisfied. He peels the shirt off Will’s shoulders, not letting him arch far enough from the floor to remove it, but tugging it far enough down his back that the sleeves of it still hold Will’s arms, with the cuffs lying limp beyond Will’s fingertips. It reminds Will of straitjackets at the exact moment that Hannibal pulls at the shirt cuffs, lifting Will’s back inches from the ground and crossing the ends of the fabric against each other. He pushes Will back, his weight resting on him and keeping his arms pinned uncomfortably; barely held by the fabric but enough to encourage a stillness from him. Will nods to show that he understands, that he’ll follow the instruction not spoken, and then hates that he’s trying to prove anything to Hannibal at all.

“Knees up,” Hannibal tells him, and Will follows the instruction the way his dogs would have done before it occurs to him that he could have feigned a challenge.

Hannibal spits on his hand with more elegance than should ever belong to a gesture like that, and wraps his damp hand across his cock. He spits a second time; the other hand; and even with this, and with feeling opened from Hannibal’s tongue, Will dreads the lack of effective lube that would make what has to follow easier.

“Good,” he murmurs, as Will closes his eyes and feels fingertips crushing into the skin around his groin, lifting his legs far enough up that his spine shoots with fresh spasms.

It’s the driving of the tip into him that drags a groan out of his lungs; guttural and unimpinged by self control. He can enjoy it, he knows, when that first bell has found its way inside, and when the movement can become something closer to pleasure than rawness.

It barely moves in him until Hannibal pulls out, and there's the low sound of him spitting again. He starts again, and there's still a strain; a heat which isn't comfortable and an edge of stinging.

Teeth gritted, Will wheedles out breath and wills the movement to soften.

He's pulling out again.

Fucking fuck.

Will knows he said it aloud, because now Hannibal's pushing in, solid, past the tip and *so much further than that*, and there's a friction where there shouldn't be, too much for Hannibal not to be feeling its roughness too. For a long moment, Will loses himself. Remembers that he doesn't have to be present for every second of his own suffering.

He's pulled back by the swaying of his insides, propelled by the shunt of Hannibal inside him, and this, he thinks, this is worth being present for.

The length stretched inside him drags backwards; Will pushes his hips up to try and keep Hannibal forced inside but it fails and he's open again; hollowed and when he opens his eyes, Hannibal's smile is slicing the air; teeth and curled lips and something worse than hunger. Will knows this look.

It's a look that means he's going to suffer.

Will wonders if this is part of a God-given torment; to perpetually reach the point where he believes he could overcome the man, survive him or escape him, only to have Hannibal relish in its inevitable failure.

He sees the knife resting beneath Hannibal's right hand, and it doesn't surprise him, this time.

The tip of the blade, a stretched isosceles sheen of steel, is placed at the base of a deep line of pink tissue parting the skin between clavicle and sternum. Will's breathing thins to avoid any raise of his chest to meet the knife faster than he's ready for.

"You've borne so many marks from me" Hannibal tells him. There's no response Will can give beyond agreement. He's doing nothing to stop him from gifting him another.

"Do you not worry that you're running out of unmarred skin?" Hannibal asks, and it's not said with any cruelty; it's being posited as a philosophical question, and Will wants to have a clear answer but he's still saturated with arousal that seems dependent on the terror that Hannibal pulls from him in increments.

"I imagine you'll have disposed of me before it reaches that point," Will answers and it was meant to sound like a taunt. Instead, it echoes like something forlorn, like a tragedy waiting to be finalised.

Hannibal registers discontent at the answer, and dances the point of the knife halfway up the scar on Will's chest. It dips into the dermis; a small nick, little more than the sting of a thick needle.

Will breathes out in relief, then understands that his reaction is premature.

“Do you see these mutilations as gifts?” Hannibal asks. “Trophies?”

“Evidence” Will answers, shifting his arms beneath him to stop his fingers from growing numb under his own weight.

The blade dips back in, creates a horizontal axis against the vertical line. It spans no more than an inch each side, the sharpest, deepest points being the ones at the start and the finish.

Beyond the sting, there’s a seething rush of anger from Will. At being marked, more than being hurt. Again. And somewhere beyond that, there’s a giddiness to the sensation of his skin *leaking*, and of the fast workings of his body as cells group to clot at the open wound, to form the barrier that will allow him to heal the damage done. It’s a salient reminder that he may be trying to hurl himself into the path of greatest harm, but that the fundamentals of his own biology are still trying to protect him, even when nothing else will.

“Would you want to mark me?” Hannibal asks, resting the knife on the plastic sheet, a thin string of red on its cutting edge. Hannibal skims a finger along it as he puts it down, catching the blood on his fingertip and putting it to his lips.

He sucks at his finger and does nothing to remove the dab of red on his lower lip.

“Not like this,” Will answers. He means it; he sees no merit to cutting lines without meaning or purpose beyond the temporary suffering they inflict, or the reminders of endurance. If he cut anything into Hannibal, it would be a warning; a branding of medieval times, where the thieves and traitors wore their societal ostracision in the burnt flesh of their foreheads and people knew to stay away.

“I suppose it would not be so interesting for me if you were to only follow my lead” Hannibal says, and he’s reaching his hand back to his cock.

“You’ve taken so many *leads* in this that anything I do would…feel like plagiarism,” Will says, bracing as Hannibal begins to push, and the cruelty of this seems worse than the new line in his skin. He’s tightened already; in the short time it took for Hannibal to deviate and mutilate, his muscles have tautened and the force of Hannibal pressing into him burns fresh.

The withdrawal, and the ensuing push, it starts to hit a pattern and the swell of it makes the heady transition from near agonising to awfully, desperately *needed*.

“You still trust me not to kill you,” says Hannibal, low breaths shaking through him and his mouth shaking as he speaks.

It’s almost a question.

Will tracks Hannibal’s movements with his hips; catches the surges and tilts down for the retractions.

“You trust me not to kill *you*” Will says, his breath coming out like a light and struggling thing.

It’s not a wholly empty threat, and they both know it.

Hannibal pulls out and presses Will’s legs flat to the ground.

“I don’t,” he says, simply, twisting Will onto his stomach and hushing the pained sounds that emerge from movements still too sharp for skin that’s not yet recovered.

Will’s face is pressed into the plastic, his arms in their sleeves gathered by Hannibal and pulled into a short knot behind his back. Careful enough, Will supposes, that it wouldn’t damage the garment.

Wet hands part the join of his ass as Will tries to raise himself into the air to meet him and this time, Hannibal’s push is a thing of violence, firm enough that Will’s chin skids into the plastic.

“Trust is too transitory a thing,” Hannibal tells him, his voice at trembling pitch. The sheeting is gathered around Will’s face and he turns so that his nostrils are closer to air than to the scent of it. His hips are bucked upwards with his weight balanced between knees and chin, but without Hannibal supporting him, the strain of holding himself up is pressuring his erection.

The sheeting rustles loud in his ears, and with his vision half obscured by the proximity of his face to the floor, it takes Will a moment to realise what’s happening.

Hannibal is still inside him but the folds of sheeting are gathered around his head, twisted and wrapping so that his face is pressed into its folds and his breath is already coming back to him through the thin pockets of space left to him.

It takes two lungfuls of recycled air before Will struggles fully against the shirt pinning his arms. He thrashes, jerking his neck until another pocket of air opens to him and he has a whole inhale before Hannibal’s fingers are on his cock, thumbing precome along the length of him and tunnelling his hand around him.

The next breath sucks the plastic up against his mouth and it’s opaque from Will’s panicked breath and this feels like dry drowning.

Hannibal’s speaking and the words don’t make it across the dense crackle of plastic across Will’s ears; there’s only the crashing of Hannibal’s hips into him, the fisting tug of a grip that’s lending his near-consciousness a kind of euphoria, and there’s the terror that he can’t breathe; that he’s proved himself to be useless by now, and that this is how he’s going to go; choked out and suffocated next to his victim, with the mess of his own body half cleaned up already.

He barely registers Hannibal releasing inside him; feels it like a dim echo of discharging firearms and all of Will’s thoughts are of death; his own, and its imminence, and of how if he’d been given a choice in how to go, it seems only fair that it should be at Hannibal’s hands.

He's thrashing, still, his hands unknotting the shirt sleeves and his vision going white from dizziness. Hannibal is all but kneading him now, and he's being told something but he can't clear the fog from around him to hear it.

His knees soften and fold and he thinks he was just told to let go. He feels himself dropping, feels himself emptying in hard, jerking bursts. There's a collapse and he's aware that Hannibal isn't inside him anymore, that he's dropped to the ground with his belly in the mess he's just made, and then there's air. Stifled, for the next breath, as the plastic unfolds loud against his eardrum, and the breath after that is a full one; a resuscitation. Will gasps the air back into his lungs as hard as he can, and he thinks of fish and how they act when they've been plucked out of water, only he can't tell if this is him submerged or hooked, right now.

The shirt is being pulled off him, and he lets his arms fall heavy to his side.

His vision loses its spots as Hannibal's hand travels up his back, warm, firm and comforting. His face appears next to Will's, blurred by proximity, and the hand remains on his back.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. Their conversations always lead to Hannibal taking something from Will; some certainty or some agency; and in this moment there's nothing left for Will to give up to him.

He lets Hannibal pull him closer, still savouring each new breath, draping an arm across Hannibal's warm, damp skin. He lets himself fall into the nook of shoulder and collarbone that Hannibal angles him toward, and listens to the slow murmured words spoken into his hair, a language he can't understand, and lets it soothe him like a lullaby.

The imbalance between them has been restored and Will's too heavy, too in need of grounding to question it.

"You need to learn to accept kindness from me, too," Hannibal murmurs some minutes later.

Will tenses.

"I believe you find it harder to endure than any cruelty" Hannibal continues, sitting up and pulling Will by the shoulders to meet him.

"Because you talk about killing me so often?" Will asks, his throat dry. "Or because when you choke me you don't seem to want to stop?"

Hannibal supports Will's back as he folds, pulls him so he's sitting upright, their limbs sticky as they lean together.

"You are forever pushing your own limits," Hannibal tells him fondly, "and I trust that I can guide you when you are at their edges."

"You guide me *to* those edges, Hannibal."

Hannibal looks proud and contemplative. He's more expressive, like this, as though the stitching of his masks has temporarily unravelled.

“Because you feel most secure there. And yet, I lose you when you’re floundering inside their broad boundaries” Hannibal says, crouching to stand and supporting Will as he moves to follow.

“I only wish you gave yourself permission to embrace the beauties of this life which are not linked to carnage” Hannibal continues, his arm is latched around Will’s waist as he guides him to the bathroom.

Will sits on the end of the edge of the tub, absently scratching at the back of his collar and untucking the sweat-damp curls from where it meets the back of his neck.

“Hard to relax when even getting a morning coffee ends in murder,” Will mutters. He’s being snippish again as the afterglow subsides into aches, and a deep frustration that he’s so immersed in everything Hannibal is that he’s not sure where his own self exists within the mire.

Water fills the tub as Hannibal splays his hands across Will’s shoulders, kneading into the muscles and pressing against pink ridges of skin; faded welts that hum dully with a reminder of their initial bite.

“Still so tense,” Hannibal observes, fingers toying at the buckles at the back of Will’s collar. The instinctive coil of reaction fizzes through nerves and simpers out through sheer exhaustion.

Hannibal unthreads the leather through each buckle, stroking at the skin beneath it as he pulls it off, resting it somewhat reverently across the back of the sink, as though he treasures the object as much as the person who wears it.

“You will accept this from me,” Hannibal says, persevering in his tenderness, guiding Will into the tub. The water is only warm, not hot, and salted; an inelegant but effective antiseptic to soothe the abrasions gathered across the canvas of Will’s skin. It stings only briefly; too weak a strength to burn at the fresh slices in Will’s chest, but enough to cleanse the mess from him. Will washes his front and lets Hannibal sponge at his back, cascading water over the curve of his spine. Lets him massage shampoo into his hair and rinse it out, deft fingers angling the flow of water so that nothing runs into his eyes. It would be tempting to stay here; to warm the water and let it soothe the deep ache from muscles and bones dragged repeatedly through endurance, but even as Will’s chin wilts toward his chest in tiredness, Hannibal nudges him upright. Gestures for him to leave the bath, and Will obeys, wrapping himself in the thick towel held out for him.

“I won’t be deterred,” Hannibal tells him as Will dries himself, and they pad toward the bedroom with its broad curtained windows and steel framed bed as the centrepiece. Will all but falls onto the soft bedding, shucking the towel off him as he pulls soft covers over himself. Without a dressing on the wound he knows it will bloody the sheets in spots that Hannibal will get him to scrub later, but he’s beyond care. He accepts the two tablets that Hannibal holds out to him, and the water to soothe his throat, grateful that at last he’s allowed some reprieve from his senses.

“Sleep, Will. I’ll clean up.”

Will heeds the instruction, all but purrs into the fingers that stroke through his damp hair, and wonders how he let himself fall so heavily into this.

Implication

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes to dim noises from the kitchen and the realisation that as he slept, Hannibal has been removing the evidence of the previous day's murder.

He smiles when he thinks of it as domesticated co-existing and dimly realises that he's been recently remedicated, and that his instincts are not wholly true to the situation.

He still feels an ache when he sits up, but it's a dulled thing without sharp edges. It's easier to move, like this. Rested and almost restored.

There's no clarity of intention to his thoughts, like this. There's sunshine and softness and a haze across his nerves. He strokes at the back of his neck and feels it free of the collar, the skin faintly raised from prolonged friction, but not sore. His clothes have been chosen for him, and sit on hangers across the door of the wooden wardrobe. Hannibal's chosen blue and white for him today; navy boxers, lightweight trousers, a matching dusky blue suit jacket and a crisp white shirt. It's one he's worn before, and he knows Hannibal seems to favour this one. He'd mentioned the name of the brand when he presented it to him, and Will can't remember that detail but remembers thinking that a high class brand still sounded like a step down from 'tailor' or 'boutique'. The feeling of satisfaction that comes from seeing Hannibal reluctantly forsaking the privileges of class is dimmer now. It could be out of understanding; seeing anyone adapt to circumstance and relative hardship inspires an uninvited empathetic response. Or it could be that the concept of wealth is something secondary to the gradual restructuring of Will's perspectives. Of how everything is transitory and how his older concepts of morality have dispersed and made way for something he can't yet identify. It presses onto the inside of his temple and he pushes at the bridge of his nose until his thoughts revert to the immediate. The sounds of knives on worktops is a welcome distraction; it means that there's something taking place that he can respond to. React to.

By the time Will walks into the kitchen, dressed and composed as best he can without a mirror to check, Hannibal looks agitated. He's in his element; surrounded by tools and cuts of meat still too identifiable as their source, but there's something curling at the corners of his mouth and a rushed efficiency to his movements.

Will leans in the doorway. He doesn't need to announce himself; his shuffled footsteps and residues of sleep sweat will have given him away. Hannibal looks up and nothing in his expression softens.

His tablet is folded in its case, sitting away from the produce on the small worktop.

It's not like Hannibal to carry the tablet into the kitchen and the upsetting of his habits is instantly disconcerting.

"We should go into town," Hannibal tells him simply, wrapping something that looks far too much like a human thigh in a sheath of thick plastic and dropping it into the chest freezer.

Going out when there's half finished work in the kitchen seems uncharacteristic. Sloppy, even.

"Are you hungry?" asks Hannibal, and Will is, uncomfortably so. He tracks his mind back through the previous day and all he can remember eating is a breakfast pastry. The way Hannibal asks him does not require an honest answer. It requires a pacifying one.

"Not yet. Do we need to leave *now*?"

Hannibal washes his hands with excessive vigour, then calms himself with an imperceptible breath. He dries himself on a teacloth, movements fluid again instead of jagged. His voice returns to its slower, mellifluous pitch, and it's as though there was never any break in the stitching.

"I believe you are still not fully dressed," Hannibal tells Will, the downturned curve of his mouth now levelled again.

Will catches the implication before it's fully spoken and reaches to the undone top button of his shirt, feeling the bareness underneath it.

No matter what Hannibal is upended by, there's still time for…this.

"Fetch it," Hannibal says.

It takes until Will is halfway back to the kitchen with the strap of leather in his hand for him to register that Hannibal is referring to him in dog-like terms again. He doesn't have the inclination to bristle at it, this time; just hands the collar to Hannibal and stoops his neck. Hannibal's fingertips are cool on his neck as they thread the ends through the buckles and tuck beneath the secured loop to ensure that the gap between skin and trappings is sufficient.

Will offers no response beyond a deferential look to the floor as Hannibal buttons the top of his shirt. He could react, and part of him thinks that he should. It's just that it would lead to argument, or to him struggling to articulate why this is not a helpful set of behaviours, and to Hannibal swiftly convincing Will that he's wrong.

Hannibal guides them out of the door and spends the walk from their apartment into the town centre in silence. It makes Will uneasy, but he can't construct any version of him positing questions as to the source of Hannibal's evident agitation that might end with a satisfactory answer. Shadows seem to dog their walk, and both of them find themselves giving second glances to the corners and alleys that line their route. Will believes that he's only copying Hannibal's caution; that he has no cause to suspect the shadows of ill intent, and simply can't help mirroring any source of anxiety. Seeing Hannibal on edge feels like chunks of earth disappearing beneath his footfalls.

Hannibal speaks, eventually.

“Where should we go for our morning coffee?”

They’re back in the town square again, with its vivid coloured buildings and stone paving, and the cafe from the previous day burns in the corner of Will’s vision. The café which is now missing one of its staff.

“You know the area better than me” Will says. “*You* pick.”

Hannibal smiles and begins heading in the direction of yesterday’s café.

“No.”

Hannibal turns to him, pleasant smile fixed across his face and eyes glinting in the late morning sun.

“Were the croissants not satisfactory?” he asks, and Will feels the urge to punch the glibness from his voice return to him with reassuring ferocity. He bites it down.

“It seems…”

Will can’t decide what it seems like. Morbid seems too ordinary a description; it applies to so many areas of his thoughts that there’s hardly any point in extending it to another.

“Distasteful,” he offers.

“We are not going to gloat. We are going for coffee. And I daresay we will find the service more favourable than yesterday.”

The audacity of Hannibal’s comfort stuns Will momentarily. He should be used to it, he knows. If he is to continue to survive Hannibal, to match him and play the part of the killer prying his way out of a chrysalis, he needs to pretend that he isn’t daunted by this.

“Fine” he agrees, catching up to Hannibal until they walk in step.

They take the seat by the window, and for all Will was anticipating some mood of fear, of grief or aftermath, the café seems perfectly calm. Four of the other tables are occupied, and the young woman from the previous day greets them with her notepad within moments of them taking their seats. She looks rushed but shows no signs of upset, and Will wonders if he imagined everything that transpired on the previous evening. She doesn’t recoil at the sight of Will’s face, and Will begins constructing the imagined relationship between her and the boy Skotte; that they existed as colleagues, and that she enjoyed his company but found him naïve; that she went along with his humour out of a desire to not antagonise or challenge. She won’t know what’s happened to Skotte; that’s a trauma that still awaits her, and Will imagines that she’ll deal with it cautiously; she won’t let her emotions out in a torrent, but will mete them out over time, and will carry with her an arsenal of doubt issues, and a diminished impression of humanity. Will wonders if he’s not transposing a little as he attempts to reconstruct the thinking of this oblivious creature in front of him.

He lets Hannibal order for both of them and he can't interpret the words, but hopes that he's asking for something substantial. His gut growls audibly and Hannibal looks momentarily mortified.

"I see that you didn't use yesterday's acquired funds to purchase anything edible" Hannibal comments.

Will's gut drops a little further when he thinks back to the wodge of notes he'd lifted from Hannibal's wallet yesterday, and of how he'd been planning on squirrelling the money away in some hidden location in case he had time and necessity to seek escape from Hannibal's company. He'd spent a small portion on coffee, water, then a single beer in the late afternoon, but the rest of the notes and shrapnel had returned to the pockets of his trousers. The trousers that had been peeled off him, and then left in the room with the mess and the body. The room that Hannibal cleaned up as Will had slept.

"Guess I'm not in the habit of feeding myself anymore" Will answers, and he doesn't say it with any bite.

"For someone so self-sufficient, co-dependency rather becomes you," Hannibal says, and the words seem too transparent for them not to have an ulterior motive behind them being spoken. Will considers that it may just be another taunt; another jab in his side until he reacts, tries to grab back all the power Hannibal's been teasing away from him.

"Guess I adapt well to most things."

Hannibal nods appreciatively as the girl returns with a coffee pot and fills two short cups. Hannibal says something to her and she seems to agree, making gestures which hint at apology and light-hearted frustration.

Hannibal appears to be sympathising with her for the fact that they're understaffed this morning.

When she rushes away with a taut but pleasant smile, Hannibal stares at Will for some long seconds before speaking.

"Ms Lounds has not maintained as much discretion around her speculations as we would like" he says.

Will begins to piece together a picture of the source of Hannibal's unease.

"She's published news of my not-death, then?" asks Will.

"That is merely a footnote" Hannibal tells him. "They know we have crossed the border into Poland, and they have some inclination as to our trajectory through these places."

"They?" questions Will.

The sound of cutlery on ceramic is doing nothing to still his hunger.

“Many permutations of ‘they’” answers Hannibal. “The FBI, and their European counterparts.”

“Interpol?”

“And the unfortunate matter of an unofficial bounty. Which, had Ms. Lounds not published the article, is unlikely to have garnered much attention. Thanks to her deft fingers, I fear it has only increased the likelihood of incompetents finding us.”

The unspoken malice behind Hannibal’s words is the subtext; *I wish you had killed her*.

Will shifts uncomfortably in his seat. His scar itches again and nothing that Hannibal has told him is good.

For Hannibal.

It takes a while for Will to realise that this development could be to his advantage, providing Hannibal’s words have their basis in truth.

If they’re found by official authorities, he can extricate himself from this with minimal blame. Providing Hannibal hasn’t created some new trail of false evidence. If they’re found, Hannibal will be incarcerated, and he will be free of his influence, his control and his thoughtfully worded assaults.

He’ll be free of the one person who doesn’t recoil from his nature, or his scars.

And that’s assuming that any police force could contain him. He considers that the usual methods of cuffs and prison cells are mere temporary holdings for someone like Hannibal, and then Will worries that he’s deifying the man.

He pushes his thoughts to the rational as he considers what would happen if some mercenary found them instead, and he thinks about who would feel inspired to seek a stranger for money. And he wonders who might be bankrolling the venture; with Mason now out of the picture, there’s no obvious source. He doubts that Margot holds that level of malice towards him, though also, Margot now has no legacy and fewer scruples.

As the waitress deposits two omelettes on the table and Hannibal suppresses the smallest of disappointments at the lack of flourish or presentation, Will imagines that there would have been no shortage of high-society victims with grudge-holding families. The chances of any of Baltimore’s affluent populace having been affected by Hannibal’s proclivities seems high, in retrospect – and if the man’s past crimes are being brought into the media, then some retribution-seeking seems almost expected.

His hunger quells his thoughts, and though he makes every effort to adhere to good etiquette, he sees Hannibal bristling at the way he loads his fork before each mouthful is finished.

His satisfaction at antagonising him is an ever-decreasing thing, and he wills himself to slow down.

“So, we’re being followed?” asks Will, most of his omelette now finished.

“They’ve used rather too much butter and the delicacy of the herbs has been somewhat drowned, don’t you think?”

Will bites at his lips to stop himself from swearing in frustration at Hannibal.

“It tastes fine. Are we at risk?”

Hannibal chews carefully, waiting until the mouthful is savoured and swallowed before he offers an answer.

“Of course. It would be naïve to assume otherwise.”

Will isn’t up for a philosophical debate about the concept of risk. He finishes his omelette before Hannibal speaks again.

“Your disfigurement makes you memorable to others.”

The words impact more than they should; he’s said it before, used it as an excuse to keep Will hidden and shut indoors, but it’s a reminder that he’s defective, somehow. Damaged. He’s cross – at himself for still allowing the self-pity to obstruct his thoughts when there are more important things at play, and then he worries that this dismantling of his sense of self-worth is only pushing him closer to dependency on Hannibal.

He’s fairly sure he can remember a time when he’d be abhorred by the idea of needing acceptance and letting it affect his choices, having existed so long outside the boundaries of social inclusion.

But then, he’s been shown some benefit to not being alone, and for all he loathes the vulnerability it has opened up in him, he thinks he might be grateful for it too. He swallows hard enough to feel his throat briefly pushing against the leather of the collar, and dismisses the guilt he feels at the comfort he takes from its presence.

“We’ll have to consider moving on,” Hannibal says, in a way which indicates that he has already planned the method of exit from this place.

Will hopes, dimly, that Hannibal will acquire a vehicle with more room in the trunk for those portions of the journey that Hannibal insists he needs to remain hidden for. The Mercedes had been a comfort for those times he’d spent at regular angles in its seats, but the more Hannibal had sought amusement under the guise of discretion, the more the contortions had worn at Will’s recovery. He hopes, instead, that practicality will spare him further indignity, or that he’d at least be able to protest more effectively.

He says nothing about it.

“Where are we headed?” he tries. It’s not the first time he’s asked.

“Sometimes the places we feel the safest are those in which we’ve experienced the most profound suffering,” says Hannibal, no longer interested in the cooling dish in front of him. He looks wistful, and for barely half a pulse, he looks *vulnerable*.

"Guess that's why your kitchen felt so *homely* to me."

Hannibal smiles, warmly this time.

"Places are not always static things. Sometimes they can exist within people."

Will finds himself wishing he had whiskey in front of him, not coffee.

"So we're travelling to some*one*?" asks Will.

Hannibal gives Will a look that conveys disappointment and irritation, severe even as it's obscured by the cup of coffee he raises to his mouth.

"I am going to assume that you are being obtuse in an effort to avoid the admission that you find my presence to be a haven for you."

Will considers calling the waitress over and demanding a bottle. He says nothing, and feels one half of his face reddening.

There's a sound of a ringing phone from the back of the café, and impatient gestures from one of the surrounding tables.

"I still have some business here to resolve, and you have an expired life to pay homage to, presuming you do not wish the young man to be discarded like the cattle that finds its way into these dishes."

Hannibal's gesturing at his plate as he speaks and his feet close around Will's under the table, pushing them together. As though they could manage a conversation without some physical reminder of how pinned Will is.

"I thought you'd mostly disposed of…him."

Will pushes the distaste and slow creeping horror at the thought of the dead boy away. It seems an added cruelty, to be talking of him as meat in the place he worked at only a day before, and yet he still needs to portray some impression of strength to Hannibal. Convince him, still, that he is the monster, because this way, he survives.

Will assures himself that he still *needs* convincing, and hushes the quiet voice asking him *what else could you be, though?*

Will watches as Hannibal places a generous portion of notes on the table, and regards the discreetly confident way he strides to the waitress, places a hand on her arm and speaks to her in a low but amicable manner. She looks flustered, harassed, even, but softens and smiles at Hannibal as though he's provided her with some solace that her morning had otherwise lacked.

"There are some shops we should visit before we return to the apartment" Hannibal says, and he's stood behind Will, the waitress now relaying plates and glasses to the back of the café.

“Quickly” adds Hannibal as Will moves to push himself out of the seat. The movement is sped up by Hannibal’s fingers threaded under his shirt and pulling on the back of his collar.

The humiliation of the gesture affects him more than the brief compression of his windpipe. Will scans the café for reassurance that he’s not being seen like this; half dragged out of his chair and shutting down the gasp that stays stuck in his throat. Two pairs of eyes look swiftly downwards, and Will lets Hannibal guide him out of the door, hand still on his neck. He wishes, in passing, that he’d jumped behind the counter of the café and drained their small collection of spirits dry. He lets the thought pass, and allows Hannibal to propel him forward, into the square and away from the segment of life they’re about to leave behind.

If he can endure this, he can find that intangible moment when it will be possible to extricate himself from all of this.

And as Hannibal drops his hand from Will’s neck to his waist, holding him as though supporting him, Will thinks that enduring these indignities may not be as much of a hardship as he keeps telling himself it is.

He hushes the quiet voice that warns him that *he’s barely pretending anymore*, and walks in step with Hannibal, missing the significance of the stares that follow them from the window of the cafe.

He can endure this, a while longer.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for delayed updates! Someone accidentally got more ill than expected and had a week in bed without the work laptop.

Some horrible, horrible advancements to the story should hopefully be up in a few days... thank you for reading!

Intrigue

Chapter Summary

Will, *no*.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's early afternoon when they arrive back in their apartment. There's a tang to the air as they step over the threshold, and Hannibal sneers faintly in distaste.

"I would very much like to secure some more lasting memories for this place," he tells Will, as he drops two bags of shopping; leather jackets and garments with defences against the cold; onto the writing desk in the living room. Will follows his lead, dropping the larger bags; a new portable cooler, cleaning products and wine; onto the ground beneath it.

"But first there are necessities to attend to."

At the intonation of his voice, Will knows that this means instructions. He thinks back to the spots of red on the cover of the duvet they'd slept under, and thinks of scrubbing them back to white under Hannibal's watchful gaze. He thinks of the way their DNA will be smudged into the bathroom, into the walls and the air, and he thinks back to Quantico and how to destroy the evidence that would let forensics identify them. He shuts out the associations of the faces he knew from those sterile rooms, as though even a memory could pull him back to the vulnerabilities that first laid him at Hannibal's feet.

He's not that malleable person now. He's cogent, and he's proved – still proving – the extent of what he can survive. It's not passivity that's keeping him here. It's strength, and it's patience, he tells himself. He shuts out the intrusive suggestion that maybe, he's sticking this out because more than all of that, he's feeling *accepted*. All the ugly corners of his mind now poking through to his skin, and all he has to do is accept Hannibal in return.

"Assist me in the kitchen."

This is the part Will isn't used to. He's seen – eaten – the results of Hannibal's culinary proclivities. He's contributed to them once before, and even then, the process had been an act; a piece of theatre that he'd performed through heavily repressed anxiety. Now, he doesn't have the protective barrier that stops him from feeling heavily implicated in the proceedings, and he doesn't feel prepared for the acceptance of his malformed morality.

He suspects that Hannibal knows this, too.

This, like everything else thus far, feels like a test.

He moves to follow, and he's stopped as Hannibal peels the jacket from his shoulders, then walks to hang it by the door. Hannibal removes his own jacket, then his shirt, shoes, socks and trousers, until he's stood in nothing but black silk boxers. Somehow, he still looks composed, the tufts of hair on his chest splayed across him like a faded Rorschach pattern.

Will starts to unbutton his own shirt and Hannibal's hands still him.

"Forgive me. I feel the need to savour these last hours in this place" he says, the affection in his voice sounding disconcertingly sincere. His hands untrap each button of Will's shirt with enticing speed and Will feels himself dropping his tension and defences with each warm skim of fingertips over his skin.

"Hours?" Will asks, as Hannibal unhooks the clasp of his blue trousers. He presses into the palms of Hannibal's spread hands as he pushes the fabric down. He watches Hannibal's movements until his gaze catch the yellow smudges on his own thighs, and he ignores the small disconnection between what is happening now and the idea that some of this *probably isn't right*.

"Until tomorrow, I think," Hannibal says, his mouth at Will's ear and Will's stepping out of his shoes, toeing off the trousers and then his socks. Will stands in his boxers, matching Hannibal in decorum as best he can, ignoring the details of lacerations and ill-healed injuries on his own skin.

He isn't broken. He's even stronger for having withstood so much.

"Shall we?" Hannibal asks pleasantly, as though escorting Will to a restaurant table. His hand rests in the small of Will's back and there are already nerves twinging uncomfortably with the pressure, and Will thinks that when this is all over, he should see some kind of chiropractor. Someone who might heal the damage done to him, rather than celebrate it and delight in creating more. The thought feels distant; like something he's been taught to think is right, and not something his instincts would guide him towards organically.

The smell intensifies as he reaches the kitchen, and it reminds Will of his first time with a girl – the way she'd apologised for the *timing*, and he hadn't understood, until his hands and then his mouth had come up red and smelling – tasting – of something he'd always believed was forbidden. He hadn't grasped it, then, what it was about that time that he cherished so profoundly, but the fresh scent of blood; of *viscera*; it reminds him again of that hunger that sits in him, still not satiated and still convinced that he *shouldn't still be trying to seek it*.

He stands mute as Hannibal leans into the small chest freezer and pulls a human thigh – a *leg* – from it. It's barely frozen; the plastic pulled from it without resistance. It's lean, and covered in brittle hairs.

"Typically, the most tender parts of any animal are in the rump, if we discount the organs" Hannibal says, and he's so *perfunctory* about this.

“I fear young Skotte was rather partial to substances which would make his liver and kidneys somewhat unpalatable.”

Will lets his face show intrigue, not revulsion, as Hannibal places the stiffened meat on the wooden worktop. There’s still some consolidation to be done between his curiosity and his morality, and now does not seem to be the time to fix this.

“The meat of the thigh will be tougher with its musculature, but it will provide us with the gift of protein. And the effort imbued in its preparation will have to serve as tribute to what Skotte has given us.”

Will wants to ask Hannibal to stop referring to Skotte by name as he carves into the meat with a serrated knife and ignores the thin speckles of red that spit out of it, half frozen.

Instead, he imagines how Hannibal would prepare *him* as a meal. It’s not the first time he’s thought of this, by a long margin. It’s just now, seeing how confidently Hannibal slices into the sinew as though Skotte’s only purpose was to provide meat for Hannibal’s enjoyment, now, Will can all but feel Hannibal doing the same to him.

Their near nakedness is doing nothing to diffuse the curiosity as it morphs into something like expectation.

“There are things lost in the flavour when the meat is frozen, even for a short while,” continues Hannibal, orating as though offering instructions on some new skill. It reminds Will of the way his father taught him of motors and their workings, and he pushes the familial association away before it can take hold.

“Fresher meat will always yield the richest spectrum of flavours,” he continues, and now he’s looking at Will, knife in hand, and Will can feel himself heating from the inside.

Will watches as Hannibal turns back to the anatomical monstrosity on the worktop and watches him slice inch-long stripes out of it, with a hunger not related to appetite.

His mind helpfully tries to warn him that this is not a sane train of thought to be exploring.

“How fresh is…*optimal*?” he asks before reason can stop him.

Hannibal pauses, the knife dipping beneath the first layers of cold flesh.

Hannibal’s expression is savagery contained in a smile and it chills Will through to the bone.

“Living.”

Will steps closer, leaning his hands behind him onto the hob, facing Hannibal. There are inches between them.

“And how long could they stay living?” Will asks, “after you pull the meat from them?”

Fear falls off him like scales as he's thinking of new opportunities. For what, he can't tell yet, but his compulsions are steering him to push. It's less a desire to please Hannibal than it is to appease him, but there's also something far more intrinsic to his nature that's governing his actions right now.

"That depends on whether one is seeking flavour or savagery."

Will feels his insides converge on themselves.

Hannibal slices again into the meat in front of him, peeling muscle and sinew from more of the same, only now with more relish to the motion.

"You've thought about this," Hannibal says, turning to face Will fully, red-slicked knife in hand. "You've imagined what it would be like to have me consume you."

Will has no verbal defence to offer. He has, repeatedly. It is rarely a pleasant imagining, but it is always a compelling one.

"Death is a kind of preoccupation."

Hannibal waves the knife dismissively and blood falls from the sharp edge with the gesture.

"I thought you had moved past your desire for your own demise?"

Will nods. "That's why I asked about survival chances."

"I think instead we should explore your perception of taste, while we have the means and space to do so."

Will nods, aware that he's narrowly avoided committing himself to something that was meant to remain as a figurative concept; an idea too unsafe to pull into the realm of reality.

"Then we'll continue as we were," Will agrees, gesturing loosely to the strips of meat Hannibal has already cut.

He sees Hannibal pause and imagines briefly at the doubt that must be passing through his head. And he wonders how he could justify this, when his experiences with Hannibal are dragged through courts of law. It's a world away, and right now Hannibal is standing almost flush against him, the tip of his knife resting midway up his thigh.

"Or, we won't" Hannibal says.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and for every bit of encouragement, here and on tumblr (where I'm prone to ranting about running out of the wine that gets this fic written). I'm still poorly so it's taking a long time to get written, but I've (mostly) mapped out where this is going and it should be finished before the new season airs.

Next update will come with a whole bunch of new warnings and tags because there is no way that what follows will be pleasant. Thank you for reading!

Insidious

Chapter Summary

There *are* limits to what a person can endure...

Chapter Notes

There are a few new warnings for this chapter - not least for graphic gore and flesh consumption.

But there's also a lot of confusion about consent in here too; Will hasn't instigated as much of this as he first believed and Hannibal is...Hannibal.

The finest tip of the knife edge dips into the skin of Will's leg and he recoils out of instinct. He's still reassured by the way his body's reflexes try and protect him when his mind and his actions won't.

"There are more nerves than arterial paths running through this part" Hannibal informs him, pressing into the soft curve of thigh. "A fingernail's width to the inside, and you'd bleed out within minutes."

Will flinches only briefly this time.

"You're too responsive to touch, still," Hannibal tells him, and it feels like a failing, even when it's stated only as fact.

"Most people react when they get knives stuck in them."

Hannibal withdraws the blade, placing it next to the hob. He places his hands around the curves of Will's butt and lifts him so he's sat across the frame of the cooker top.

"Stay."

Will knows by now that nothing will be gained from disobeying as Hannibal strides from the kitchen, and shifts so that the ridges of the gas cooker are not pressed so closely into flesh that still feels tender. He waits patiently for Hannibal's return, and when it sees him pressed

with his back against the ridges of metal and his wrists pulled out in front of him, secured with rope, he does nothing to challenge it.

It's okay. It's still a game.

His heels are no longer on the floor and his weight is pivoted by his back, nerves twitching with each small movement as his joined wrists are pulled above his head and then secured to a handle below him that he can't see.

"You're not going to turn that on."

He says it not as a challenge, but for reassurance.

Hannibal only smiles, and pulls one ankle out towards him, wrapping a short length of rope across puckered skin and linking it to the cupboard handle behind him.

Hannibal positions himself between Will's legs as he secures the second ankle, and reaches for the knife.

"Remember" he says, one hand stroking at the inside of Will's thigh. "That this is nothing more than you asked for."

There's not enough tension in the rope to hold Will taut; his muscles are flinching and trying to find balance without putting pressure onto his back. He hasn't asked for this, he's sure. But then, he hasn't asked for this not to happen, either.

"Can you keep yourself quiet?" Hannibal asks. "Or do you want assistance?"

The warning flicker in his eyes says that this question is less part of the performance, and more of fear that any loud noise would alert the neighbours to their presence, and potentially, to their proclivities.

Will's mind catalogues the many means Hannibal has employed to keep him silent these last few weeks – from inelegant strips of leather and cloth pulled too tight around his head, to contraptions designed to hold a jaw open, with metal that scrapes at the soft parts inside.

"I can stay quiet" he says.

"Good."

Hannibal strokes at the inside of Will's thighs, kneading the skin as though tenderising it.

"It is best if you relax," he says.

"*What's* best?" asks Will, trying to still the thin tremble that runs through him.

"Your comfort."

There are teeth in Hannibal's smile and Will doesn't ask if by comfort, he'd meant flavour.

“Your palate would benefit from some refinement, through experience.”

At this, Hannibal turns away, still positioned between Will’s splayed legs, reaching his knife to the worktop and the recently cut portions of meat. He carves two slivers with immaculate precision, balancing both on the flat of the knife.

“The coldness will dampen the intensity of the flavour” he says, leaning over Will and angling the knife so that it rests in front of his mouth. The square of meat looks almost like a sweet; all rich pinks and thread patterns, with no edging of skin to toughen it.

“Taste it,” Hannibal instructs.

Curiosity moves Will’s tongue out toward the meat; the rawness of it isn’t as discomforting as he thinks it should be, and the detail of his current position not affording him much option to refuse seems irrelevant.

He laps at it and the sensation makes him think of sorbet, and as the thin crystals of ice dissolve on the tip of his tongue, he thinks instead of biting the inside of his mouth; of the tang that comes from drawing fresh blood.

He opens his eyes to Hannibal looking satisfied to the point of delight, feels him pressed close to him through the contrasting fabrics of their boxers, and each of his senses heightens.

He can feel his own heartbeat; an anticipatory thud in his chest; and can almost hear Hannibal’s; a steady, stalking thing.

“What does he taste like?”

There’s little else Will can discern about the flavour; it’s *meat*. He’s struggling for better descriptors as he tongues at the warming morsel, and the more he concentrates on the taste, the less his stretched position and growing fear seems to impact him. It’s almost meditative.

“Rust” Will offers. “And…cattle trucks.”

“You are dehumanising him.”

Will doesn’t have a defence. He can’t see the benefit in ascribing a personality to the textures at the tip of his tongue. He watches as Hannibal takes up the second sliver, watches as he inhales, placing it on his tongue, then chews. He’s momentarily captivated, and Will stares at the way his jaw works around the meat, and catches himself wondering how the meat would taste from inside Hannibal’s mouth.

“What do *you* taste?” he asks Hannibal as the movement of his jaw stills.

“My words would influence your interpretation of the flavours.” Hannibal taps at Will’s jaw and Will responds to the prompt, opening his mouth and taking the first morsel between his teeth. “You do not need to articulate it; just pay attention to what’s on your tongue.”

Will closes his eyes and focuses on the sharpness of the flavour; the bite that he hadn’t picked up from just pressing his tongue to it. The roughness of cut muscle, tough on his teeth and

rich on his taste buds. His mind supplies reasons for the flavours; youth and activities and a personality now dead between his jaws. He swallows, too quickly, feeling the chewed flesh jam in his throat.

He opens his mouth before his eyes, and he feels Hannibal on him; mouth closed over his and the flavours warmed and amplified. There are hands on his thighs and feelings of hunger pervade every part of him.

“It is hard to remove a cut like this from the living” Hannibal says, pressing hard through the fabric of his underwear, “without some form of lasting debilitation. Amputation would be cleaner.”

Will shifts; betrays the first true indication of terror. There are, he realises, and perhaps too late, limits to what he is prepared to suffer. He trusts that this is simply one of Hannibal’s taunts; a threat so big that the act of what will follow seems moderate in comparison. Or a threat designed to weave its way through Will’s inherent need to be scared before he can acquiesce; made effective by the knowledge that even if it isn’t true in *this* instance, it could be in another.

“But taste is not dependant on quantity.”

“This isn’t –“

“Hush.”

Hannibal picks the knife from the sideboard and positions it on the outside of Will’s thigh, inches down from the bone of his hip. He kneads at the skin there, as though feeling for the path of muscles, of arteries and nerves and what to catch and avoid.

“Your injuries have softened some of the toughness from you” Hannibal says, and he’s sounding faintly theatrical; more like a ringmaster than a threat.

And then he slices; swift and sharp and deep enough for the fresh wound to have a throb behind the sting of it, and he’s more of a surgeon now, a doctor or a pathologist, with Will unsure if he's the patient or a cadaver.

Will hisses through gritted teeth, careful to keep himself quiet. There’s another slide of the knife and this time the hiss comes from Will’s throat and he pulls at the ties to buck away from the sensation. Hannibal stills him with a hand on his stomach. There’s horror creeping through Will; a moment’s introspection that warns him how far into this he’s got, and how far he is from any of the atonement he first came out here to seek.

It’s eased out of him as Hannibal leans over him, running a warm hand up the path of his arm and wrapping it across the pulse of his wrist, just below the knotted ties holding him in place.

“You’re remarkable” he whispers and Will can’t say anything in response; he can feel the outside of his leg growing damp with his own blood and it’s easier to focus on that than to accept praise, but he offers a short nod of acceptance, feels Hannibal’s teeth at his jaw and sinks into the warmth of Hannibal’s hands tracking over his skin.

The blade bites in a third time, and *now* it feels like savagery; it's *inside* him, and Will can't help but conflate the feeling with guilt not yet addressed. Another cut, short and hard, and Will's voice is a stoppered gurgle in his throat. There's a hand at the top of his thigh and it's supposed to soothe him, he thinks, or distract him with the way his cock curves away from it.

"You don't see what you are," Hannibal says, and the tenderness has dropped from his voice and he sounds feral. The hand moves from his groin and now there's a tug from the new wound; a feeling like skin being torn *from* him, and then there's a scratch; like gravel under his skin; and then there's an *opening*. It's stinging and searing and it's obscured by Hannibal's hands but the blood is cascading weakly down his leg, puddling on the worktop.

"You said you would be quiet," Hannibal warns and Will stills, the remnants of a shout vibrating the back of his throat. "Do I need to stop you?"

"No," Will answers, voice low and quiet as proof of his behaviour. "I'm sorry" he adds in a tone that suggests playing along, but the words still escaped from him before he could consider why.

Hannibal's holding a thin sheet of bloodied flesh; an elongated wedge only millimetres thick at the skin edge and little more than a centimetre in depth, tapering off and dripping a watery red across Hannibal's fingers. It's smaller than the delicate slivers they'd taken from Skotte, but more vivid in the colours and textures that seep from it. Everything smells of rust. Will's stomach contracts and nausea distracts him for a short moment, and then there's a hand on his cock coaxing him back to the present. His eyes are closed and then there's a sound of the knife on the worktop, and before he looks, Will knows it's a bit of *him* that's being cut; made into something edible, not human. A portion to be prepared and shared between them, as though he's no more than a source of sustenance and his own will is irrelevant. He exists only for Hannibal in this moment and there's a shudder running through him that he knows intimately. He *wanted* this. He did. And even the pain of it isn't quietening his wants, only what he needs now is less about just touch. It's *consumption*. It's totality. Obliteration, perhaps.

"Taste."

A slip of meat is placed on Will's lips, dripping. It's sharp, warm and…indecent. There's revulsion in Will's movements as he presses his lips together over its thinnest edge.

"Close your eyes. Concentrate."

Will obeys, lapping his tongue across the flesh and taking it fully into his mouth.

It's not a pleasant sensation. The temperature of it is off, like fruit that's been left in midday sun. It's tart, and there's an unpleasant sweetness that borders on acrid. He chews, feels threads of sinew that should still be attached to him and he imagines he's tearing himself to pieces in increments; dismantling himself and committing himself to only the wreckage.

He wants to pull it out of his mouth; reassemble it and put it back where it was cut from, as though he could mend any of this. He flinches against the ties, opening his eyes and seeing himself; mottled and cut and *damaged*; as though only now seeing what he's doing to

himself. Hannibal stands, pressing between his legs, rigidly hard and eyes closed in rapturous enjoyment as his jaw works, a smudge of red at the side of his mouth.

The sight is almost enough to calm Will. It reinstates some elegance and control over the carnal disgust that's starting to soften him.

Will swallows, and wonders if the consumption of his injury could somehow speed its recovery.

Hannibal's pressing closer as he chews, and Will's straining against his position now, the ridges of the cooker too solid against his spine and the hole in his leg slowly numbing. There are too many sensations to focus on any *one* and he needs to be *distracted* and Hannibal's savouring this too slowly.

It's a handful of thudding heartbeats until Hannibal speaks, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth to wipe at the remnants of Will's blood on his face.

"You give so much of yourself. To me."

"Literally," Will answers before he can stop himself. He thinks he feels sick, but he can't ignore the way his body is still reacting as though this is *okay*. As though this is something he *needs*. He shuts out a voice that asks him *why;* asks him if really, he's only acting in tandem with words once whispered through his drug-seared brain. It's not that, he tells himself. It's just him. And in the parameters of what Will knows of himself, it's okay.

"It's rare for the truth of symbolism to be so captivating when made flesh."

Hannibal's voice is the pitch of animals defending their prey and he's leaning over Will's thigh, his face poised above the open wound.

"Hannibal…"

Hannibal's tongue works inside the gap from the incision and it's not painful. It's a feeling of nerves being whetted and pulled and dragged along the coarseness of Hannibal's tongue and it's *inside* him. It's more intimate than any time Hannibal's threaded his voice through Will's thoughts, or pushed up inside him and had him gasping, choking for *reprieve* and then for *more*.

Will tugs again at the ties and feels something give; not enough to free his arms but enough to grant him more movement.

The closeness of it terrifies him and he knows, rationally, that it shouldn't. That this is how they've always been.

Hannibal pulls his mouth away and he's leaning in to kiss him, wet and bloodied. Will responds to it before he considers that he doesn't have to, but he's tasting himself on Hannibal's tongue and it's intrigue as much as anything that keeps him moving *with* Hannibal, not against him.

His mouth tastes of metal.

Hannibal pulls back and slips his boxers down and this, this Will can deal with. This part he knows, and this part has him back to hunger and to instinctive masochistic acquiescence.

“You accuse me of getting inside you,” Hannibal says and sometimes, Will wishes he could punch the words away from him because there’s an undercurrent of smugness to everything he says; Hannibal sounds more like an orator than a person. He’s performing, and it’s distracting.

Hannibal spits on his hand with that same infuriating elegance and slicks his cock. Will licks at his lips expectantly, waiting for the damp fingers to peel his boxers fully away, to press at him, open him up where he’s *used* to being opened and he can forget the debilitating discomfort of his situation.

“I cannot tell if you should be destroyed or revered” says Hannibal, as though the decision to act on either was beyond his control. His fingers find the wound in his leg. Will feels it parting, stretching and tearing around Hannibal’s fingers, and then he sees Hannibal pushing into it before he feels it.

Will looks away as the tip of Hannibal’s cock disappears into his skin.

It doesn’t feel *real*. It feels like the imaginings and dreams that plagued him since he arrived in Europe, like some manifestation of his fears made into caricature.

Then there’s a push, and it reverberates through his leg, shunting at the nerve endings and dragging against the wet muscle.

Now it feels real.

Now it feels as though he's unthreading the strings of molecules and biology keeping Will whole, entwining himself with every fibre until he's a part of the same genetic composite.

It's too much.

“Stop it.” The words spill out like a last reminder that Will still has some right to self-preservation.

Hannibal doesn’t stop; looks up at Will until their eyes are burning holes into each other. It’s not their agreed safeword, and even as Will thinks of the three syllables that might make Hannibal stop, he shuts the thought out, knowing that even saying them to himself would create a tide of guilt and loss that no amount of intimacy could push back.

Hannibal’s slipping inside Will’s skin, lacking in any traction that could lead to satisfaction, and every movement grates, sending growing waves of nausea through Will.

“*Please*.”

It’s a last protest; a plea to reason from someone immune to any but their own.

Hannibal pushes in and Will *feels* himself splitting. He pulls again at the ties, feels the tension drop from his shoulders as his arms pivot forward; still joined at the wrist but mobile enough

to push at Hannibal's chest.

"Get *out*" Will says and his throat is wet with bile.

Hannibal pulls out of him, unsatisfied and snarling.

"Taste it" Hannibal says, and for all Will is the one wearing the wounds, Hannibal is the one to sound injured.

"No."

Hannibal pushes Will's arms back, rests a hand on his stomach to keep him laid out on the cooker top. There's a sound of sparking; rapid successions of ignition clicks that don't lead to any sensation, and Will's tensing as Hannibal's hands reach between his legs for the dials of the hob.

"Hannibal, *no*."

Hannibal's smile is murder and his red-tipped cock is pressing against the fabric guarding Will's skin.

"No," Hannibal agrees, and he's backing away, fingers reaching for the ties around Will's ankles. It takes a handful of seconds for the tension to slacken and for Will's feet to sink floorwards, the feeling of sickness rising through him until he's swallowing the convulsions of his throat. Will raises his bound hands to his mouth as instinct, feeling his gut clenching. Hands on his shoulders steer him down and he bends his legs to kneel, gulping down the rising sickness.

"Taste."

Will isn't sure of how he steels himself, calming his nerves and subduing the growing distaste, but he manages; raises his arms, opens his mouth and tastes himself again, only the bite of it and the sourness is mixed with a residual bile and he's imagined this before; recreated scenes like this and immersed himself in the symbolic carnage of it all, but now he's feeling it *fully*, with a tight grip on his shoulders and his throat jammed and choking. Now he's lost any hardness and it's just *ugly*.

Hannibal shunts inside, pressing at the back of Will's throat and now, now his gag reflex jumps up. He's pushing at Hannibal's stomach to force him *back*, *away*. Hands in his hair pull him back and all Will can taste now is the soured echo of omelette and something rancid.

Hannibal registers the warning with enough time to pull out of Will's mouth, pushing him away by the forehead with enough force to knock against the cooker. Will swallows; feels textures burning in his throat and a throb at the back of his skull as he presses his hands to his mouth until he can stop gagging.

Hannibal has a look of fury wrapped across his features and he's not moving; just standing, facing Will with his dick in his hand.

"I can't," Will tells him.

The words taste foul.

Hannibal stares as though expecting Will to bow his head, retract and apologise, lower his hands and open his mouth.

Will allows himself a breath; long, measured and sobering.

“You will,” prompts Hannibal.

Will looks down and for a moment, he considers meeting expectations. And in that moment, the weight of those expectations presses heavy on his shoulders, pushes his weight onto his knees and he sees himself ground into Hannibal’s shadow as nothing more than trails of *meat* and *suffering*.

He always expected he’d fight harder than this.

He launches himself off his knees, shaking the tethers from his ankles and swinging his bound hands at Hannibal’s chest. He watches the air recoil from Hannibal and turns his back on him, fumbling with the knife on the worktop to cut his wrists free.

The angle’s wrong and Hannibal’s hands are on his arms, and he’s pressing into him from behind, still hard.

“You will,” he repeats and his breath is a hot crawling thing across Will’s shoulders.

“Cut it off,” Will breathes through gritted teeth, the knife falling out of his grip and clattering on the worktop.

Hannibal’s teeth sink into the muscle joining neck to shoulders and this time, Will lets out a vowel sound; protracted and gasping and full of fury. The first utterance of safety he's made.

Hannibal softens the bite and picks up the knife.

“As you wish,” he says, with no amount of graciousness to the words.

The rope drops from Will’s wrists .

Will’s fingers reach to the back of his neck, to the buckles that keep the collar looped across his skin. He’s finding his way through the catches when Hannibal’s fingers join his, more calm than Will’s agitated fumbling. Will swats at them the way he’d swipe at a bug on his back and tracks out of the kitchen, as though only just realising that he has the option to do so.

“I can’t,” he says again, staring at Hannibal as he peels the collar from his neck, placing it on the counter as a peace offering of sorts, aware that the stream of blood from his leg is spotting the floorboards as he paces to the bathroom, muscles screaming around the incision and resolve burning through him with more ferocity than any pain. "I won't."

It’s *okay*, he tells himself, not to throw himself across every precipice that presents itself.

It’s okay to do more than to just *survive* his circumstances. He has options, he knows, to change them.

He just *needs* to shut Hannibal’s voice out of his interior, get him out from under his skin for long enough to work out what in hell those choices are.

Shift

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will."

Hannibal's voice thrums through the bathroom door. The timbre is low, musical and steady. There's the thinnest edge of uncertainty to it, and this reassures Will as he towels the moisture from his skin and tears gauze with his teeth.

The bleeding has stopped.

There's nothing but a litany of marks that will heal, if Will ever affords them the time and reprieve to allow it. He tests his cut leg for pressure; cautiously balancing more weight on it and assessing how it might feel when he's less buoyed by determination.

There's a throb in the wound from alcohol and Will ignores that it feels like an echo of Hannibal inside it.

There's no needle in the bathroom kit, and Will won't ask Hannibal where his secondary kit is. Tertiary kit. He doesn't know how many boxes and pouches of tools Hannibal has scattered through this home since they adopted it. He hears a memory of Hannibal warning him to learn to stitch and bites back a laugh filled with something poisonous. The gauze will be enough.

"Will, I need to know that you are still with me."

Will secures the gauze in a knot and pulls his boxers from the floor. There's a slight limpness to the fabric from sweat, but they're still soft as he pulls them over bruised skin.

"I'm still here," he answers.

There's no sound of Hannibal retreating and his presence outside the door is more irritating than imposing. Will knows he should be furious. Should feel indignation seething through his skin, and yet what he has instead is a numbness slowly edging him towards clarity.

"Just…give me a moment. A while."

Will lets himself sound more vulnerable than he feels. Honestly, he'd be surprised if Hannibal was convinced by the act – but then, there's that thread of self-congratulatory pride that runs through Hannibal that would want to believe that he'd finally broken the unbreakable. Will stares at his reflection in the one mirror in the apartment. His facial hair looks thin, still

eclipsed by the lines running thick across his cheek, still too pink and raw to look discreet and weathered.

He runs a finger across the deepest line and feels a residual slide of Hannibal's fingers inside it. He shuts the feeling out and reminds himself that no matter how far inside him Hannibal gets, his skin is still his own.

He hears bare footsteps retreating across wooden floors and allows himself enough time to feel the softness of the towel against his skin, relieved and still faintly surprised when the white fabric doesn't come away with any fresh claret in its fibres.

What he has right now is acceptance.

Acceptance for every ugly corner of his thoughts and every strip of his flesh, his mutilations like an insignia for some organisation he doesn't want to belong to.

What he has right now will kill him.

He understands that; knows that there is no path the two of them can take together that will end with him whole. He ignores the pithy reminders that this could have anything to do with affection. It's a useless emotion; something that propels people to lapses in rationality, and something Will never saw himself as privy to unless he'd crafted it himself. He ignores the quiet voice that warns him that it might have caught up to him anyway. He reminds the quiet voice that he's confusing it with dependency.

The path that would offer a solution is still obscured; fogged by proximity and claustrophobia.

Will pads to the living room where the rest of his clothes are draped, shuffling into each garment with just enough caution to avoid antagonising his skin. He can hear Hannibal moving in the kitchen and knows that he'll be on him in a heartbeat as soon as he hears the door. Will looks to the window, to the darkening evening clouds, and anticipates the coldness of the streets he'll be walking. He's assuming that his foray into the outside will be temporary, but finds himself reaching for the bag of newly bought clothes, pulling out the soft leather jacket Hannibal had picked out for him. He skims through the pockets of Hannibal's hung coat for cash, crunching a small fold of paper notes into his trouser pockets. Just in case.

This freedom, even if brief, seems too easy to acquire. As though it could have been done at any time.

Outside is bitingly cold; too crisp for late spring, and Will wonders about the northern trajectory of their travels. Wonders if there's a destination that will provide them with some insight into Hannibal; wonders what refuge could exist in a world for a person like him. Then, he fears that if he tries any harder to immerse himself in the fractals of Hannibal's motivations, he might not be able to detach from them at all. He grinds his teeth together, grounds himself through discomfort that for once he is in control of.

The temperature reminds him of Virginia, of ice crunching over grass and breathless runs with his dogs, and a sense memory lets him think of the texture of fur through his fingers as he navigates through the orange glow of streetlamps and the stone and concrete underfoot.

There isn't a destination in mind, beyond simply *away*. Far enough away to let his mind reassemble with only one voice rattling through the caverns of his skull, and for just long enough for that voice to remind Will what in hell he's actually doing.

The throbbing of his leg slows his footfalls and already the only two people he's passed have crossed the street to avoid him. He understands that he looks more menacing than he feels; well dressed but looking ragged, with his face pinned into a low cut grimace. He can't begrudge others their reactions to him. It's no more than a person stepping back from a bonfire that's spitting embers; they may not be close enough to get burned, but the instinct to preserve is still there.

Will curses his mind for using its newfound freedom for wallowing. He passes a shop with a blue light and bottles in the window, pauses, then retraces his steps and fumbles through enough words and gestures to purchase a bottle of something amber coloured and expensive, handed to him in a blue plastic bag. It's not until he's left the shop that he considers that he should have bought something edible to accompany it. The thought of more awkward interactions instils a faint dread in him, and he clings to the feeling like something forgotten; an old habit of insecurity that he thought had been wrenched from him.

And then, as his footsteps take him to a sprawl of muted greens; grass and trees sprawled out over a square bathed in shadows; he finds himself reaching for the back of his neck, taking a moment to acknowledge the absence of the collar and then another moment to chastise himself for seeking it as a grounding tool.

There's no bench in the park area, and very little light. It's not until Will sees the concrete steps, overgrown with trailing weeds and all the more theatrical for it, that he registers the presence of a crypt. He expects to see other evidence of dead buried here to be preserved and eventually forgotten, and sees none. It seems as good a place as any to rest, as though the proximity to death and its theatre should always accompany him. There's no one else in view; no strays or romantics to interfere with whatever reverie will bloom in his head.

He sits on the stone by the crypt entrance, resting his back against the locked door and embraces the cold that runs through him as it creeps through the trouser fabric. He unscrews the bottle, takes a swig that tells him it wasn't worth the price, and tries to let himself exist only as *himself*.

Hannibal wants to carry him across Europe.

Hannibal will use him as entertainment, and as a testing ground for his impatient bloodlust. Hannibal will throw him at any predator that crosses their path and whisper incentives to kill, and will treat the act as a beautiful thing. He will warp Will as fully as he is able, and he will trust in Will's need to cling to approval to keep him pinned to his bidding.

Hannibal will *consume* him. Figuratively, and eventually, probably, literally.

Will takes another swig from the bottle; this one slightly sweeter than the last, and more effective at muting the rancid flavours still lingering in his mouth.

He's *let* Hannibal do this to him. Everything that's been done to him, Will's allowed; welcomed, invited, or just not protested convincingly enough.

It's still easier to see Hannibal in terms of orchestrator and himself as the follower of his lead.

Except he's still trying to see the experiences they've shared in terms of permissions granted and not granted, rather than in terms of things he'd wanted too.

About how everything that transpired earlier in the evening had been the product of things Will had imagined; had seen in dreams and wanted to make real. He knows there's only so much he can attribute to surges of hormone-driven instinct; there was something like *trust* at play in there too. Trust that Hannibal would understand him; would know why he sought the things he did, and would allow Will the space and circumstance to explore it for himself. His fascination with death, and his need to place himself in every role that would take the responsibility of his role in it away from him. As though suffering could equate to penance.

Will shifts against the stone, takes another sip, and blocks out the thought that this would be warmer right now with Hannibal's skin pressed close against him.

It's such an *ordinary* fantasy.

He's annoyed at himself for humouring something so trite, and wonders how he left so few corners of his mind for the soft things that would welcome the simplicity of human interaction.

And then he understands that this is precisely why Hannibal is such a good fit for him. All the monstrosities of his imagination would never be satisfied by someone still immersed in light; they'd be ruined by him. Every sweet experience with some as yet unnamed sweet thing, full of kindness and naivety, it wouldn't stand strong enough against the horrors twined through each loop of his brain.

He thinks of Alana, and of her determination to prove the best of people, to solve and to fix and to use pragmatism instead of raw nerves, and even the strength of her wouldn't be enough to unravel the tendrils that keep him tethered to the underworld he's crafted around himself. There's still too much *hope* in her persevering optimism, as though she's deliberately leaving blank spaces open in the conviction that something will prove the best of her beliefs. Will doesn't have any of those spaces unfilled anymore.

That's not a world that's open to him. Not anymore.

Hannibal's world is still welcoming, with its violence and cruelty and unrelenting purpose.

One world would see him ostracised.

The other would see him as meat.

And yet, there's a reminder, somewhere inside in a voice so quiet it can't make itself known, that Will came out to Europe because he still believed that some form of justice could be executed. That the cost of Abigail, of Alana's mobility, of those dead creatures who suffered at Hannibal's hands, could be reconciled somehow.

Will came out here because he thought something was wrong, and that he might still be able to fix it. Because his other option was incarceration at the hands of the FBI. Because he thought that no matter what he does, he can still make a change for the better.

And now, knowing that Hannibal is being hunted, that their location is known and they're subject to the law again, Will knows that he can still pursue this option.

He's endured enough. It's time to make Hannibal accountable.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and for all the excellent feedback!

Drop

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The feeling is sinking out of Will's limbs as he sits, and he thinks he should have added gloves to his layers of clothes. His whiskey bottle has been emptied by only a quarter; not enough for drunkenness, but enough for a warm rumble in his veins that fights back the chill of the air.

He should get back. It's been long enough, and he needs Hannibal to believe that he's back *with him*.

He'll play at forgiveness, and at trust. It'll be an act, to a degree, right up until circumstances place them in the path of authorities. And at the exact moment that Hannibal will expect Will to fight for their freedom, he'll hand it over.

He's screwing the cap back onto the bottle, mouth warm with the sting of the drink, and accepting with a low thrum of unnamed dread that with this route, he'll have some atoning to do himself.

There's movement across the grass, and Will's slipping the bottle back into the blue bag, unfurling his limbs to move and shutting out the inevitability of guilt that grows in his gut. The footsteps are accompanied by a lighter padding, and the unmistakeable sound of a dog pulls an involuntary smile to Will's face.

Will moves to start retracing his steps, trying not to look over his shoulder at the source of the sound. It's a sentimentality that would distract him, he knows, and it's only the thin fuzz of whiskey in his veins that's allowing him this short moment to revel in nostalgia, and he has a plan to enact.

A loose plan, perhaps, but it's something to cling to.

Will misses the movements in the shadows as he walks on steady feet toward stone pavement, the bottle swinging heavy against him. He's stiff; the cut strings of his thigh cramping and seizing with new footfalls. Instinctive need to conceal his discomfort has him disguising the hindrance to his walking as best he can; he focuses on making each step evenly paced, regular, and as unstilted as he can manage.

The pretence of strength is almost as good as real strength.

Two more steps, and there's something whispering at a pitch just lower than the biting evening wind.

It sounds like Will's name.

Will steps again with more caution, There's no one visible in the periphery of his vision, and the orange glow of streetlamps reveals no movement; only silhouettes of house fronts, of narrow streets and dry stone paving. He'd like to blame the whiskey and his imagination, but experience has taught him to never assume that the best outcome is the most probable. He's listening more closely for shifts in the air, footfalls or breathing, but the only noise that follows him is a low keening from the dog in the distance.

He speeds up, feeling his leg tense with increased pressure. The renewed discomfort seems a fair trade-off against the prospect of potential safety, even if only against his paranoia. Will considers that he shouldn't have left the apartment; that he should have just withstood Hannibal's presence for a little longer. That he should have been strong enough to assemble his thoughts to rationality, and trusted that the few medications Hannibal let him have were untampered, and that no whispered voice had coiled through his thoughts in those moments between consciousness and numbness.

The trail of his thoughts follows a more thoroughly trodden path as a spasm; hot and white and vivid; shoots through him, and he wonders if this was the real intent behind Hannibal's punishment. To cloud Will's brain with endless feedback from nerve endings, or give him the option to fog it instead with the medications that would soften it. Either option has his mind neutered, and he entertains the idea that this is Hannibal's way of trying to distance himself from Will. Damage the thing that drew him in, to make the inevitable separation less…raw.

Will tries, really tries, to shut the thoughts out. He's had enough experience with other people undermining him without falling back into the habit of doing it to himself.

He tries.

Hannibal had warned him. Said they weren't safe. Hannibal had been the voice of reason, and Will tries not to let this upset his resolve. He's *allowed* to have some impulse, and he's allowed to react to the multitude of things that have been done *to* him.

"Will."

Will is launching off the heel of his foot before the shadows converge around him and stop his attempted sprint before it can gain momentum. There's a hand over his mouth and another across his stomach and he's being pulled backwards, feet dragging across stone and a voice he knows intimately shh-ing in his ear.

They're in a narrow street, and the warm hands retreat from contact. Hannibal's voice is quiet, tense.

"We are being followed," he says, voice seemingly thick with worry, and this time Will doesn't let himself imagine that any of that concern, real or not, is for him.

“You followed me here?” Will asks in a whisper. Hannibal pulls him further down the street with a rictus grip on his arm.

“Tread softly,” Hannibal tells him, his voice merging with the shuffles of their footfalls. “I was worried you would put yourself in danger unnecessarily. It appears I was right.”

Will isn’t sure he believes him; probability dictates that the likelihood of them being caught up to after so little warning is low, and that the specificities of their location cannot be common knowledge.

The signs *he’d* looked for when he was trying to seek out Hannibal had been ostentation; death tableaus and financial extravagance and fine dining. Their time in Poland has been relatively discreet. One missing boy from a café wouldn’t be enough to draw the bloodhounds to them, unless Hannibal hadn’t been wholly transparent about how much information Freddie had published.

Will hears the nearing keening of the dog as Hannibal pulls him further along the narrow street.

“Can you run?” he asks Will, his breath hot on his neck and his hand now wrapped protectively around Will’s middle.

Will nods. He’s hoping that this is still a ruse; a ploy to make Will feel vulnerable, to pull him back to the idea of Hannibal as a safety net, to have him further exacerbate his injuries by humouring Hannibal’s orchestrations, to further increase his dependency. Or, to undermine his last remaining attachment to security in the form of the dogs he’d choose to surround himself with, by making him fear the sound of this one.

There’s dim light at the far end of the street they’re on and Will is trusting Hannibal to take the lead with his alleged escape.

Will can’t hear the footsteps Hannibal tells him they’re running from, only feels his hand in the small of his back and a voice in his ear instructing him *now*.

Hannibal has more speed than him; sprinting to the end of the narrow street, unimpaired. Adrenaline moves Will, but he’s metres behind.

Hannibal pauses at the end of the street, blocking the light momentarily with his silhouette as he waits for Will to catch up.

There’s spearing pressure on Will’s legs as the silhouette ahead of him drops. Instinct has him pressing himself against the cold of the wall behind him to stay out of view, and as the folded outline of Hannibal is dragged past the window of light, limp, the next instinct has Will pummelling his feet against the ground to catch up, the bag with the bottle clutched in his hands in lieu of a weapon.

Chapter End Notes

I know I tend to say this a lot, but thank you for reading - it means so much that people are investing time in this gruesome thing. There's a lot more to come on this one, and it's taking even longer to write than I bargained for; I'd hoped to have it finished before S3 started but there's a lot still unwritten. I'm just delighted that this is being enjoyed (I'm not sure that's the word, actually) and that I've had some of the most excellent and emotive feedback I could have hoped for. I'm gushing now and it's detracting from the tone of what's gone before, so I'll stop here. But, thank you.

Stuck

Will ducks below the bullet that burns the air behind his ears, pressing back against the corner of the street he's emerged from.

There are two figures ahead of him; both dressed in shades of dark that blend too easily with the night.

Definitely not police.

One of them is facing him, face wrapped in shadows and the contours of a firearm catching the light.

The other, more lithe and with a feline edge to their movements, is pulling Hannibal by the back of his jacket, dragging him across the pavement towards a blue car. Even in the low light, the rust on the vehicle is visible from here and Will finds himself concerned with the amateurism of their assailants as much as with disarming the rapidly advancing shape. He's twisting himself to round on the unsteady arm pointing a weapon at him, trying to get a look at the face of his would-be attacker.

"Leave - you don't *matter,*" says the breathy voice as Will grabs at his right arm, twisting it so that the fingers slacken around the hold of the gun. "You're the clue, not the mark," he adds in rushed, panicked breaths, rounding his left arm and thumping Will awkwardly against the side of his head.

Whoever he is, he's *young*. And weathered by a kind of desperation that clings to the lines around his eyes, shadowed and beaded with sweat.

Will feigns slowness; lets himself appear woozy as though the blow had dented him, as the man bends to try and retrieve the gun.

He *could* leave. Let Hannibal reap the repercussions of his actions. The idea can't take hold, and as he's waiting for his risk to be assessed by the man still scrabbling for purchase on the gun, there's a shout from the person dragging Hannibal into the car.

"He's meant to be *dangerous*, Jake."

Her voice is impatient, and shaking lightly with nerves.

There are lights turning on in nearby windows. The man called Jake stares at Will with a hesitation that allows for the bottle bag in Will's left hand to swing into his back, knocking him to his knees. He ducks as the shouting woman advances on him, black rag in one hand and knife in the other, shaking fluid off the cuffs of her jacket with her movements. Will's twisting, swinging the bagged bottle as close to her head as the angle allows. The bag snags on something, and there's a fist in Will's back and a smell of chloroform in the air. He's

crouched now, smacking the bottle into the ground, trying to get something sharp to increase his chances of getting out of this without lasting damage. Chloroform in the hands of amateurs has a lethal potential, and, as his bottle crashes and a shard spears up through the plastic, Will decides it's the *indignity* of going out this way that he objects to; the lack of poetry and that these idiots have no *understanding* of what they're doing.

He's jamming the wet glass toward the leg closest to him and it's not a smart move; it won't immobilise them, but there's nothing else he can do with the air around his face stinging his eyes, and the glass isn't cutting through any fabric, but his palm is *smarting* and he can't *breathe* and there's a feeling like spinning or like falling and then his eyes won't open and there's *nothing*.

The first thing Will feels is an intense wave of nausea, and a thudding, splitting pounding in his head.

It feels like a hangover; and Will thinks back to the whiskey. Then he thinks back to the shards of the bottle, and how he'd misjudged; failed to make a weapon out of his pity prop and only scraped his hand instead.

His thoughts track backwards and he's aware that he'd needed to *escape*, and then he tracks back further and knows that as much as that, more than, possibly, he'd needed *Hannibal* to escape.

And yet.

He's scrunching his eyes, and then opening them, and there's no change in light between the actions. He swallows, throat rough, and coughs into fabric. The shudder through his chest tries to make a movement that his limbs don't follow through on, snagged in restrictive binds that put pressure on his circulation.

Fuck.

Will listens through the thud of his headache, tries to determine any kind of sense of his whereabouts.

There's a sound of breathing nearby; he's at floor level, with his face resting on something soft, and there's a warm stuttering channel of air not far from his face. He's waiting for light to hit his eyes but there's no visibility in the room at all. The only smells in the room that would offer clarity are of blood and a residual taint of chemical – chloroform. He wants to believe that it's Hannibal resting only feet from him, but he's unclear if he wants this because he still wants opportunity to tear the smile from his face and see him brought as low as *he's* been, or because he knows that deeper than his personal frustrations, there's a need to not

have Hannibal damaged at the hands of idiots and amateurs. Hannibal deserves retribution, but not like *this*.

He shifts again; tries to find weaknesses in whatever has him so rigidly confined, and there's nothing more than a thud inside his skull from the exertion and a fear that any struggles are only tightening the constrictions. He stills himself, and listens.

There's murmuring, muffled and distant through walls. There's not a lot he can hear; the name *Mona*, words like *borders*, *money*, and *waiting*, and they're all spoken in the tensed tones of people who are out of their depth and scared.

Will hears the breathing next to him quicken, and a short sound of stifled disgust.

At least he's sure it's Hannibal now.

He makes a sound of acknowledgement – a low hum that scratches his throat and pulls another cough into his chest.

There's an answering shuffle, and Will understands that Hannibal is subject to the same confinements as him. The same stopper around his voice, blocking out all but guttural sounds. Discussing an exit from their predicament isn't an option.

There's more shuffling, and an awkward grunting sound from the exertion, and then there's a feeling of a forehead, clammy from sweat, pressed lightly against Will's. Beyond that, there's just a feeling of warm breath and something hopelessly, uncomfortably intimate about their situation.

It's hours until any light or movement reaches them; hours meted out with shifts in the timbre of breathing, with tiny movements made to instigate and then withdraw from proximity, hours in which the cramping from immobility had turned from ache, to searing pain, to numbness and back round again.

The opening of the door to the room which holds them stills their collective breathing. It's vivid, the light that breaks in. Two silhouettes cram the doorway, and Will finds that he's looking at the blur of Hannibal too close to his face before he looks at the two figures advancing on them hesitantly.

"Oh," comments the female voice.

Hannibal looks changed; weakened, tired and vulnerable, with half his face swallowed by black cloth. He's staring back at Will, as though trying to communicate something imperceptible.

Jake stands above them, holding a water bottle.

“The instruction is to keep you alive,” he says, and he sounds terrified, like he’s rehearsed this and is now performing it in front of an assembly of unforgiving peers. “So we need to give you water. Don’t make a sound.”

Will watches Hannibal’s eyes crinkle with amusement.

“We’ll keep you alive but that doesn’t mean you’re safe from us,” adds the female Will assumes is called Mona. She’s only speaking to Hannibal. There’s a shake to her voice too, but she’s holding a knife and she’s careful to hold it in a way that makes the sharp edge clearly visible to both Hannibal and Will.

Jake crouches over Hannibal, and now Will can see the contortions of knots holding Hannibal still; the way his arms are behind him, secured to his chest with washing line cord, his ankles curved up behind him and linked in a loose and clumsy hogtie. No leverage there for kicking back.

Will can see Jake deliberating; wondering how to get Hannibal upright without unhooking the ties on his legs, then watches with some relief as Mona crouches beside him, snapping the long cord and pushing Hannibal to a sitting position, pressing him into the white wall behind them.

Will isn’t sure how much Hannibal’s slowness is natural stiffness and how much is a trap to lure their captors into thinking that he’s more incapacitated than he is. He hopes for the latter.

“Scream and I’ll cut you,” says Jake unnecessarily. Will doubts that the world holds any torment that could pull a scream from Hannibal. He watches as the gag is pulled from Hannibal’s face and the bottle held to his mouth. Watches as water cascades from the edges of the lip, and watches Hannibal stop drinking as the water level reaches its half way point.

“Thank you” he says.

There’s a full uneasy second before Hannibal looks pointedly at Will, and then to Jake and Mona, before calmly asking “Are you also planning to secure the survival of my accomplice?”

Jake and Mona share an uncomfortable look between them.

“It is easier to pass on the burden of a live human than to dispose of a dead one,” Hannibal says, amicably. “And I assume we are being held until your benefactors arrive. I can’t imagine they would be thrilled to be greeted by the scent of rotting flesh and a grieving captive. I suspect it would lessen the impact of whatever they have planned, and subsequently, their gratitude towards yourselves.”

Hannibal smiles pleasantly and Mona nods at Jake.

Will feels his legs unfurl with a snap of cord, and feels his shoulders pushed against the same wall Hannibal is leant against. He’s grateful for the gag and the way it swallows his reaction to the hole in his thigh tensing as he’s manoeuvred, but he’s more grateful for its absence when it’s pulled from him, and air surges deep into his lungs.

“Thank you,” he offers in imitation of Hannibal, not missing the minute creep of a smile on Hannibal’s face. As he drinks from the clumsily offered water bottle, he hears Hannibal attempting further polite negotiations.

“I do not wish to impose further on what must be a stressful situation for you both,” he says, “but the unfortunate details of biology decree that I must.”

“No.”

It’s Mona, predicting the nature of Hannibal’s request.

“I understand that this puts you in a difficult position” Hannibal continues, disguising manipulation as empathy. “But this floor is carpeted, and I imagine this is either your own property or that of a relative, and I would feel terribly discourteous if it were to suffer unnecessarily for the mere cost of your doubt. I can assure you I am asking only out of necessity. You may keep us as tethered –“

“Can we not just gag him again?” asks Jake.

“Please,” asks Hannibal. “Your benefactors would be unlikely to want to transport us reeking of piss. They are no doubt wealthy, and would not wish whatever plush interiors they have in their vehicle to be tainted.”

Will can feel his headache dissipating, slowly replaced with a grudging respect for the deft way in which Hannibal is dealing with their predicament.

He hopes that this forms part of their escape plan; a necessary freeing of bindings that would allow them a chance to fight back, overpower and then escape. And as his bladder responds to the shift in movement, he wonders if actually, Hannibal is more concerned with sparing his dignity, and is leaving the rest to chance.

“What makes you think they want you alive?” asks Jake, now pacing across the carpet.

“You said as much. We’d be dead already if they didn’t,” Will posits. He’s aware that he’s speaking of them as a collective unit; that by aligning himself to Hannibal, he’s tentatively securing his survival. Painting himself as more than something *dispensable*.

Jake exits the room and returns moments later with a steel bucket, placing it between Hannibal and Will.

“Figure it out,” he tells the room, visibly unseated by Hannibal’s words.

“Will we have long to wait?” questions Hannibal, unphased.

Mona pulls at the cloth gag now slack around Hannibal’s neck and then thinks better of it, dropping the fabric back down.

“Come on,” she motions to Jake, and the two exit the room, shutting out all semblance of light.

The door doesn't have a lock on it.

Their arguments carry through the walls.

Will hears them complaining; that *his* only purpose had been to lead them to Hannibal, that the people coming for them would view him as a burden, that they couldn't risk setting him free, and that they feared that killing him would be as Hannibal had warned; messy and inconvenient. Their fraught conversation is interspersed with fantastical imaginings about what to do with the money, about student loans, respectable retirement homes, about avoiding the petty errands they tried to run and the unsavoury associates and risks it put them in the way of. He doesn't find any sympathetic reaction in the pit of his mind. They're not providing him with the means to escape, so in this moment they are meaningless.

In the darkness, he adjusts himself, flexing his legs where he couldn't before and willing Hannibal to initiate conversation; anything to distract him from the terse discussions ready to assign him his fate. His thigh keeps seizing up and he can't feel his fingertips and he's grateful for the dark; there's moisture at the edges of his eyes as pain groups in his nerves with varying intensity and he tells himself that it's this, and not an overwhelming disappointment about his shortening future that's dampening the skin on his face.

There's a shuffling and the feel of the steel bucket moving closer to his outstretched legs.

"I am confident you can escape from this situation unscathed" says Hannibal in a low whisper.

"Unscathed" echoes Will, mockery clear in his tone.

Hannibal edges closer, shoulder nudging at Will's.

"Nothing you have survived thus far has made you any weaker," says Hannibal, and his voice is moving forward, the contact from his shoulder now gone.

"I beg to differ."

"You seek out all the ways to transpose your feelings of responsibility" Hannibal says, and now he's leaning fully forward, his hands behind him reaching for Will's waistband. "Much in the same way a penitent catholic will seek solace in the ritual of self-flagellation."

"What are you doing?" hisses Will, more in response to the fingers fumbling with the catch on his trousers than to Hannibal's careful framing of Will's intentions as being wholly self-created.

"I do not know how many hours we will be kept here. They have been kind enough to provide us with a receptacle for necessary functions and it would be unwisely stubborn to avoid using it."

"We're pretending this is just a casual inconvenience, that I'm not… immobilised by a gaping hole in my leg that *you put in me*, and that we're not about to be sold like cattle to…"

Will's voice tails off as Hannibal tugs at his trousers, pulling the waistband of his boxers down, just enough to free him. He finds himself lifting his hips to accommodate the movement, shifting so that he can break the contact, twist and balance on his knees, poised above the bucket. It's not easy; he can't see anything and his ankles feel tangled in their binds the more he moves.

"You're panicking" Hannibal tells him. Will concentrates on speeding up the indignity of circumstance, willing himself to relieve the pressure building in his bladder.

"It's not panic," Will says, flinching as Hannibal's fingers fumble around his cock, positioning it over the rim as though to assist.

"Don't" he adds. Hannibal withdraws and there's the sound of liquid hitting metal and the voices from outside growing distant with footsteps.

"I imagine you would like me to return you the same courtesy?" Will asks, shifting back from the bucket with a thud.

"This is far from ideal," Hannibal says "but yes, please."

Before Will can readjust, Hannibal is pulling his boxers up for him, tugging at his trousers to follow. It's not comfortable, but the darkness conceals the blush he feels rising in his skin.

Will returns the favour, numb fingertips negotiating clasps and zippers, pulling the fabric down. He doesn't offer or try to hold Hannibal through the act. "Should we not maybe try and untie this first?" asks Will. Hannibal answers in the negative.

"Without something to cut it, I fear we will only tighten the cord."

There's a difficult silence while Will tries to understand if Hannibal is being deliberately lacklustre about any plans to escape, or if his knowledge of knots is as extensive as he implies. Will smiles grimly and decides it's the latter.

"Who is it?" Will asks over the sound of splashing liquid. "Who have you pissed off *so much* that we're stuck here, awaiting an expensive execution?"

"Could you pull me up again, please, Will?"

Will considers not; letting Hannibal at least embrace some of the retribution he's owed, but the idea strikes him as ugly and so he's struggling with the leverage of Hannibal's waistband, applying more care when Hannibal hisses at him through his teeth. He offers no apology.

"To answer your question" Hannibal says, his back thudding against the wall, "I do not know. I would argue that the blame lies largely with Ms Lounds in this instance."

It still feels as though every article that Freddie publishes is still somehow Will's responsibility.

"She knew what to print because Margot told her," Will says, memories of the alliance between the two still daubing vivid marks in his memory. "Why did you let Margot *go*,

Hannibal?”

Will thinks he can hear Hannibal smiling in the dark.

“Her decision to let Mason burn was hers. She owed us nothing.”

Will shifts, feels his leg numbing.

“Margot was the only one who could have described my…*face*. Tell me, was it detailed, what Freddie printed? How did she *know* to direct people here?”

“She didn’t. Not precisely. But the chase has been going on for many weeks, as has the rumour of an unofficial bounty. Ms Lounds merely clarified the amount, and indirectly provided contact information and some very thorough speculation.”

Will remains silent, and for a moment considers that he genuinely regrets not removing Freddie’s influence from the world. He shakes the thought off.

“There was an artistic impression of your facial scarring” adds Hannibal, his breath warm on Will’s skin. “It was surprisingly skilful, and was why I wished to keep you hidden.”

Will begins to protest that *this is not his fault* as a noise outside the room distracts them. There’s frantic scrabbling, and a ringing phone. Instructions are being passed; information about parking spaces, about timescales and guarantees of discretion.

The door swings open and Jake steps into the room, peering into the bucket and holding it with a look of intense discomfort.

“You have about thirty minutes,” Jake tells them.

Hannibal smiles, calm. “And you expect that they will simply hand you the money, remove us, and that this will be the end of your involvement?” Hannibal questions. “These will be dangerous people, Jake. They will not take kindly to you knowing of their identities.”

Jake ignores the warning, carrying the bucket out of the room.

There’s a view of the corridor beyond the open door; beige carpets leading towards a kitchen, and the foot of a wooden bannister. They’re on the ground floor.

There’s the sound of a door catch, and of splashing on concrete. So, they’re on the ground floor of a building with a back yard.

“You will be stiff” Hannibal whispers in Will’s ear, “but you need to be able to run. Can you?”

“Not like this” answers Will, gesturing uselessly at the knotted cord around him.

“Tuck your legs up” Hannibal instructs. “Get the circulation going.”

Will follows the instruction, feels a returning throb in his muscles. Hannibal does the same, giving the impression that he is only acting out of a need to relieve tension.

Jake returns, Mona behind him.

“The chances are that they will simply dispose of you rather than honour their end of the agreement,” Hannibal tells the pair, as though their earlier conversation had not been ignored and abandoned. “Are you sure you want to take that risk?”

“Please, stop talking,” asks Mona, and now she sounds more gathered, as though the impending meeting with the unnamed benefactors requires reserves of confidence that she’s only now garnering. She stands over Hannibal, pushing him forward with gentle pressure, checking the security of the ties. Satisfied, she pushes him back to the wall, a little too hard.

She repeats the action with Will, taking slightly less care.

“We’ll be fine,” she tells Hannibal. “You should worry about yourself. Yourselves.”

“Very well,” Hannibal says. “And what of the other person who assisted you in tracking us? Your dog walker? What reason would he have had to not be here when the money arrives?”

Mona’s mouth thins to a line. She looks as though she wants to offer some justifying response, but has the look of someone already learning that any information given to Hannibal is little more than a weapon for him to wield.

“It would not hurt to keep weapons about your person” Hannibal suggests, his smile sharp.

“*Can* we gag him?” asks Jake.

Mona ignores him, ushers him out of the room and closes the door. A moment later, there’s the sound of a revving engine, and a car moving from the front of the house to some short yards further away, before the engine stops and front door clicks.

“You will have two choices” Hannibal tells Will, his voice barely louder than breathing. “You can run, return to Poznan, to our apartment, and remove all evidence of your implications in our activities.”

Will turns to Hannibal, imagines the expression in his eyes carrying through the dark of the room.

“Assuming I’m not killed the second our new visitors arrive?” he asks.

“It is precisely because they will kill you that I am providing you with these alternatives.”

Will nods, feeling acclimatised to being secondary to Hannibal. To being a shadow, or a skewed reflection.

“The second option will be to hide, to follow, and to use your wiles to find salvation for the both of us.”

Will exhales slowly, feels the return of a tremble into his limbs that he equates with fear, and by extension, Hannibal.

“I assume I shouldn’t ask how you plan to overcome the unknottable knots?”

“You should trust in me as I trust in you” Hannibal says, and there’s a shuffle, and snap of tension unwinding from Will’s wrists.

“How long have you had that?” Will asks.

“About twenty minutes” Hannibal answers, cutting the cord around Will’s chest and passing the newly acquired knife to Will.

Will cuts his ankles free, then moves to find Hannibal’s wrists. He feels the snap, moves the knife upwards and Hannibal stops him.

“They will need to believe me incapacitated” Hannibal says.

“You *are* incapacitated” Will says, hesitantly passing the knife back to Hannibal.

Will pulls the cord away from his skin and rubs feeling back into his wrists and ignores that he finds himself missing the elegance of Hannibal’s careful ties against him. He worries that he’s confusing the idea of being unwanted dead weight with being a desirable dead feast, and doesn’t want to let the imminent danger cloud his thoughts on the matter anymore than it already has.

Will focuses instead on how to move, using the cut cord to wrap around his thigh above where his injury is seeping through his trousers. He secures his flies and stares in the direction of the door, waiting for a prompt to lunge and to run.

“You should get out before our new visitors arrive” says Hannibal as the voices beyond the door raise in pitch and urgency.

“Why are you *letting* them take you?” Will asks in a whisper, standing up and stilling the headrush that follows him.

Hannibal opens his mouth to answer as a call of “*They’re here,*” rings through the house.

Will grabs a stray length of the cut cord, wrapping one end round his fist in a makeshift garrotte and moves to the door, positioning himself behind it.

It’s a lousy weapon. It depends on strength.

“Now, Will.”

The catch of the front door clicks, and Will’s through the door of the dark room as fast as nerves can propel him. He doesn’t want this to be a fight; a minimum of four people, probably *all* armed, and him with a bit of glorified string as defence.

Jake sees him first; stills Mona's hand on the door and gestures frantically as Will navigates the short corridor, fumbling with the handle of the back door in the kitchen.

Mona's face spans fury and fear in one clench of her jaw. "One moment, Ms Kazinski," she calls through the front door, shaking her head frantically as Jake pulls the gun from his jacket. "There are a few locks to be undone," she offers in trembling explanation as Jake speeds towards the kitchen, gun out, and a threat from Mona *not to make a sound* rushing through the air after him.

Will unsticks the door, tearing through it and slamming it on Jake's fingers as he speeds into the dusk-lit yard. Beyond Jake, Will can see the front door opening, and counts at least two shapes walking into the house with the demeanour of visiting in-laws. Jake retreats back inside, defeated, or trapped, as Will assesses his exit; wooden fencing and dense shrubbery, all scalable and one option quieter than the other. He hears the dim sound of a silenced shot and turns back in time to see Jake fold to the ground, a spray of red following his descent.

He runs.

Wait

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's a suburban neighbourhood he's in. Squares of light punctuate the gardens he's dragging himself through, snippets of conversations and television shows in a language he doesn't understand singing through the cold air. He needs to double back on himself. Needs to find where Hannibal's being taken. Needs to hope he's not too late, and that wherever they take him, he needs to be able to follow. And somewhere in this, he needs to not let the cold freeze his bones, and he needs to avoid the path of bullets fired from guns with silencers.

It's over an hour until Will navigates his way back to the front of the street; the houses counted by their manicured backyards then recounted by their uniform frontages; the house still holding Hannibal lit up in squares of muted yellow, showing the quickest of movements in shadows, and then long stretches of stillness.

It's another half hour until Will finds a way to quietly jam open the lock of the rusted blue car that had carried them there; sat on the street to give way to the severe looking jeep in the driveway; and it's another twenty minutes until Will has eased the numbing cold out of his fingertips, waiting for the insubstantial warmth to spread deeper into his limbs. His shirt is a thin veil against the elements and he finds himself pining for the jacket he'd started the previous night with.

He knows he should have run.

He still could.

Instead, he's still trying to find a solution to the relentless problem that Hannibal poses, telling himself that he's not *rescuing* him. He's only doing what he can to ensure that whatever retribution Hannibal will inevitably suffer will be more *appropriate*.

Instead, he's sat on the floor of the car on the passenger side, knees to his chest to keep out of view. There's a clench in his gut from fresh fear; that sitting out here, freezing, he's allowed time for the ugliness of revenge to tear the life fully out of Hannibal. He can't rationalise it; can't see Hannibal being subjected to something as ordinary and inevitable as death. There's no weapon within reach in the vehicle; the only treasures in the glovebox are a map – useless, without knowing where on the paper he is – and a half roll of polo mints. He eats one in lieu of the water his body is telling him he needs, and it's almost enough to pull moisture into his dry mouth.

He wants to cry. He attributes it to the brittle cold and the way it's still shaking his chest, and to the keen throb in his leg which sends spasms through his nerves with every new movement. It's *not* about the defeat. It's not tight wound frustration at how close he came to the idea of getting free from Hannibal, only to find the same dim sense of conscience that

brought him out here now pulling him back into the shadows. It's *definitely* not the fear that he's not doing this out of righteousness, but because he can't process the idea of Hannibal not being there. With him.

He watches one window in the house go dark, and one on the ground floor light up.

They've been in there for as long as he's been out here, and for all Will is feeling the impact of his circumstance, he's certain that Hannibal will be faring worse.

Will feels a small swell of something that only the German language has the tools to fully articulate. It doesn't translate to a feeling of safety, or of comfort, and he finds it disintegrating into the low thrumming unease he's acclimatised to.

He'll try, to save Hannibal. There's an imbalance between them; an unavoidable truth to their dynamic. It makes sense, Will knows, that he would prioritise the poetry of Hannibal's existence over his own need for something as mundane as an insubstantial escape. And it's this realisation that prompts him to understand something he's known but denied for too long. That if Will doesn't sever the metaphorical cord that keeps them linked, it'll strangle the both of them.

-

The moon has travelled to the other end of the windshield before the door to the house eventually opens. All other lights, bar the dim glow of streetlamps, have been shut off. Will puts his fingers on the jump cables, ready to spark at the moment he has opportunity for pursuit.

One figure stalks out of the house, eyes glinting as he scours the area for unwitting observers. A silent gesture later, and a figure in a tweed skirt and puffed cold-proof jacket follows him. The boot of the Jeep rises with a thin hydraulic hiss and a third figure emerges, his back to the outside.

He's dragging something.

There's the shortest second of visibility; of Hannibal, naked but for boxers, with his chest shining like an oil spill and crude black lines of surgical maps etched into his skin. His jaw looks hung, not balanced, and there's a lump where his right eye should be that looks like a ripe plum, freshly bitten.

Will was expecting to see something like this. And yet, the image burns.

He watches the boot of the vehicle shut with a gentle thud, and watches the three upright figures take their seats inside the Jeep. The woman – Ms Kazinski - in the driver's seat, with the man next to her resting a gun on the dashboard. They're still scanning the area as though expecting an interruption, and Will guesses they must know that Hannibal hadn't been alone when he was brought there. The engine of their vehicle growls awake, and Will waits only as

long as it takes for the tail lights to skim the end of the street before he's in the driver's seat, sparking life into the rust trap, and in pursuit.

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Chapter End Notes

Short and introspective chapters are a cruelty for which I will tentatively apologise. I can drop hints as to this update being representative of the titular theme of the story, but also I'm not that subtle; the brevity here (which I will soon eclipse with my rambling author notes) is to make way for the chapter to follow it. And that one will be a party. But, possibly, not *that* kind of party (yet). And definitely not for Hannibal.

Thank you all for being such wonderful company for this horror show! x

Burnt

It's a tense drive through suburban neighbourhoods and indecipherable road signs until the streetlamps give way to country roads; narrow, tree-lined, unlit and leading further away from any hint of chance intervention from strangers.

Will draws back, the tail lights far out of view. He's only passed two vehicles in the last ten minutes, and the car he's in is too conspicuous if it's seen. It feels like running into a battle blindfolded; he has no armour, no weapon, and barely a clue as to where he's following Hannibal to.

The road ahead divides into a fork. Will takes the left tine and hopes it's the right decision. He's governed by little more than the denseness of cover afforded by the sparsely blooming trees that pack the roadside, and the hope that if he is seen, at least this way he has a chance of staying hidden if he can move on foot.

It's another few minutes before he pulls the car into a spot that could pass as a layby; a dry mudded patch of grass lined by gravel.

He's fucked up.

There's no sign; nothing, anywhere, of the car he's been pursuing. He's out in the middle of nowhere with the rattles and howls of nocturnal wildlife, in a white shirt damp from sweat and a fuel tank that's steadily depleting.

He's in a country he barely knows the geography of, pointing in a direction that the tree tops tell him is east, with nothing to guide him beyond instinct and only the loosest hope that the people he's following might not have a destination in mind, so much as be looking for somewhere *remote*. He knows that he could turn back, could follow road signs and guide himself back to their temporary home in Poznan. There's no life back there he could assemble for himself, he knows, but there's a semblance of safety that it might provide him with. He could still abandon it all. Abandon Hannibal.

Except, Will finds himself fumbling with the catch of the car boot, the first time he's had to explore the rest of the vehicle without being witnessed, and he's trying to form a plan; borne of desperation and a hold that only Hannibal knows the strings of.

There's a ragged fleece blanket scrunched in the back, and Will pulls it across his shoulders in some hope of blocking out the night's cold. There's an empty water bottle and a tyre pressure gauge, and nothing else at all. Nothing useful. Will ignores the swell of defeat surging through him, and he ignores the dull stain seeped through the fabric around his thigh. It doesn't hurt right now. It's *fine*.

Will walks from the car, the blanket still tucked firm around his shoulders and the ground feeling crisp underfoot. The roadside woodland could feel homely, he thinks, under other circumstances. He follows the incline of the muddied bank, willing for some clue, or some solace, or a slow death from cold to break him out of the anxious sense of utter impotence that clings to him.

It's a long stream of minutes, shivering and filled with waning determination and only sporadically lit by the moon, until something gives him any cause for attention as he hits a clearing at the top of a bank.

There's a light – it's dim, and distant; flickering through trees and he estimates it's just under a mile from where he stands.

It's *something*.

He knows there's no reason to assume the light is the link to Hannibal, and that he's not just catching a glimpse of revellers holding campfires in the woods, and that the vehicle he'd been pursuing could instead be miles into the distance, but it's the best thing he's got since *nothing*.

He follows it.

There's a brimming turquoise hue to the horizon by the time Will gets closer to the source of the light, and there's a smell of burning in the air. It's woodsmoke, mostly; damp and heady.

The tremble in his gut tells him this is where he needs to be. The lactic thrum of his muscles, worn from stumbling through poor light towards whatever this is, the sting of his skin from the thin whips of unseen woods and brambles, it tells him that he's not equipped for it.

Will moves through the undergrowth, until he's close enough for sounds to overtake the growing scent of burning.

It's confusing, at first. There's talk of camera angles; of lighting and visibility, and of the intended effect of the visuals. It's surreal to the point that Will considers he's hallucinating this juncture of his journey.

Then, there's a low sound of groaning, and it slices the air like something inhuman and yet unmistakable. It's no sound Hannibal ever made in Will's presence, but it's the same timbre, the same accents to the breathing, that Will knows. Intimately.

It sounds like pain, and it's not something Will has ever heard from Hannibal. It's a different pitch to the way he imagined it sounding in those tentative fantasies; the ones where he saw the monster transformed into something human, and vulnerable. It's *ugly*.

The words resume over a low crackle of fire and Will shifts closer, his shaking footfalls masked by irritable exchanges demanding *speed* and *effort*.

The next voice to carry through the spindles of branches sings up Will's spine.

"Is doing this…" Hannibal is saying, only his voice is travelling in waves, pushing itself out through exertions. "Resurrecting… your son's memory back to flesh…Ms…"

Then there's a sound of gulping, the address swallowed down and replaced by a gasp that sounds wholly involuntary.

Will finds himself wishing he'd been able to draw such unguarded reactions out of Hannibal.

He's creeping further forward, the cover of trees thinner as he reaches the outskirts of the clearing.

"Revenge is only ever a varnish," Hannibal's saying, in rushed and furious breaths. "A gloss for fools to hide…"

Will sees the cause of Hannibal's unwilling pauses in his taunts as another low groan gurgles through the crackling air.

The view isn't clear, but it's enough.

Hannibal is elevated, naked and prone, at shoulder height and knotted onto wooden structures strung together with rope. Beneath him is the source of the burnt air; the highest tendrils of the flame stroking inches below back.

"…How dull it is."

Will crouches, watches the shine of Hannibal's crudely decorated skin, as orange; blood and oil combined, he guesses; cascades down the tensed muscles of Hannibal's ribcage.

The silence of the three figures around Hannibal is disconcerting, but with the view of a handheld camera, angled to capture Hannibal's form as he shifts against the swelling heat, Will understands that this act of retribution is for more than just those in attendance. This is a collective reckoning; some construct formed from wealth and vengeance to be shared as a balm for those who'd suffered losses at Hannibal's whims. It's being *documented*.

He could let it happen.

Will watches as the woman, conducting herself with a kind of grace that suits the operatic macabre of all Hannibal is, poises with a scalpel across Hannibal's abdomen. There's a black scarf around the lower half of her face and she's careful to angle herself out of full view of the camera.

Hannibal sounds like he's trying to laugh and it's an increasingly wrought pretence.

"You won't cut any organs out of me from there."

Will considers that the reason he *doesn't* want to let this happen has less to do with righteousness than it being about him not wanting to let other people claim the suffering he's

endured from Hannibal. How he wants ownership of all that has happened to *him*, and this clamouring of others to siphon it away is an injustice, somehow.

As he treads through the last barriers of woodland, he hopes, deeply, that this isn't true. That he's not so selfish as to discount the loss felt by others, and that his motivations are not so base. There's no room for him to dwell on it as the attention of the small group shifts from the scalpel to the interruption he presents.

Will's fist is brittle as it skims the hard front of the woman's forehead, knocking her backward, away from the fire and into the trodden, singed grass. She's still adroit as she falls, the short blade in her hand slicing the air around Will's ankles and missing only by the thinnest of breadths. His shoes stamp on her wrist, then her chest, and the blade is in his hand before the other two parties converge on him.

The first is strong, but he's moving with the clumsiness of someone more used to entering each fight equipped with weapons. It's still a firm knee that catches Will in the gut, as he swipes the blade towards the attacker's face, and as Will feels himself dropping onto the earth, there's a spray of red that follows him; beads of blood that aren't his, and it's enough to buoy him. Will slices at the tendons of the foot that swings at him, and lurches away from the falling figure before it can land on him.

Will's pulling himself from the ground, palms cold and smarting from his fingernails curled into them. He's swiping now at the new shape looming above him, feeling a foot connect with his shin before he can gain traction on his upward movement. There's shouting around him, and the fire in the air has a new poison to it. The second man is bending Will's right wrist back and his fingers are slackening around the scalpel's handle, and Will is kicking out, his feet smacking hard into shinbone and his head rushing as he feels a crack reverberate through the soles of his shoe.

It's burning hair that Will can smell, and as he's curling himself away from the second shape to fall to the ground, there's a clogged shout of "*behind you*" colouring the air in Hannibal's voice.

The woman – Kazinski – is holding a short length of rope in her fists, and it's at Will's throat, fast and firm. Skin drags against dirt as she pulls him back. There are hands on his thighs from the second man as the rope pulls tighter against his neck, twisting behind him. A thumb presses into the soft hole in his leg and a scream suffocates inside Will's lungs. The scalpel is still in Will's hand and it's a move made of desperation, but it's working; he's twisting his arms behind him and he feels the blade penetrate the fabric of Kazinski's skirt as the breath heaves out of him. He jabs again, feels the dragging of the blade through nylon and then through muscle, and as screams that aren't his paint the air, he finds he can breathe again.

There's blood again; in heavy spatters, and again, it's not his. Will knows what he's done without fully seeing it; knows he's cut into the same arterial path Hannibal had spoken of cutting through him only a day earlier. This, Will tells himself, is different. With this, he didn't have a *choice*.

The man pinning him to the ground stills as though shocked, and it's the pause Will needs to be able to shake him off and crawl towards the raising height of the flames, the twisting

shape of the first man with his burnt hair and lumpen movements proving only a small obstacle, overcome with a stamped foot to his face.

The glow of firelight shows a rippling on the skin of Hannibal's back, and his silence is warning enough that damage has been done. Hannibal blinks at him through his unbruised eye and nods, as though offering approval. Blood streams from his nose with the movement.

The ropes securing Hannibal to the makeshift wooden frame cut cleanly and quick, but the strength to lift him fully away from the tendrils of smoke isn't there. Will tries; stands and holds his arms beneath the slick, hot skin, lifts and feels his hands growing damp from blood and oil, and feels his spine fold from the weight of Hannibal against his frame. Hannibal falls, no protective move made to soften the drop, and Will drags him; pulls him across the cold dry dirt and cuts the last threads of rope from his wrists. The incision between Hannibal's ribs is deep; spilling out red in the shape of an inverted wine glass, but Hannibal was right. There are no organs exposed through the dermis; just sliced muscles and blood loss. The thinner cuts above it are theatre, not damage. Will almost wants to laugh at how *human* he looks, like this; naked, paling and incoherent and nothing like the figure of terror that pulled him to his darkest edges and beyond.

"Will."

Hannibal's working eye is unfocused, and he's reaching a hand to Will's. A moment of sentiment; for the devotion inferred in Hannibal's broken voice and smoked out lungs to filter through the horror, and it's too much of a distraction.

There's a thud at the back of Will's head from an object being thrown, and it's not enough to dent his consciousness, not quite, but there's a reactive wave of nausea that lurches through his stomach and he's coiling on the ground, spitting mucus and bile and stilling himself as the scalpel is pulled from his clenched fingers.

He's being pulled by his hair and Will expects the sharpness of the blade to find his skin as he's dragged closer to the growing flames. He's thrashing and finding no purchase, his heels skidding through mud and the nearing heat toying against his skin. A second pair of hands pushes into his chest and he's flat on the ground, his face inches from smouldering dry wood and fern.

They're saying something, these men. He knows he's supposed to respond from the way his face is slapped and a hand on his jaw tilts his head towards one of them, but he's no more than a blur of dark clothing and the only word he can decipher is *mother*.

Will thinks he understands who he just killed.

The pressure drops from his chest and he's being pulled again, and now he can feel the singe of flame on his shirt and he's pooling all strength left to him to get away from it. He jerks his head forward, feels the tug of hair against his scalp, and a reprieve from the heat at his back as he pulls away from the fire. He can't see with the smoke prickling at his eyes and there's a familiarity to this brand of terror. There's a heartbeat; his own, thick and thunderous, and before the next one there's a wetness; cooling, refreshing, almost. It's on the back of his neck,

seeping through the shirt onto his shoulders and his back, and it's not until it hits his face, fresh and fluid, that he recognises the hue and scent and tang of it.

He drops forward, away from the red, balancing on hands and knees and urging his body to crawl further away from the fire, and another surge of it spatters against his back; almost heavy with the force of it, cloying and heady and potent in its symbolism.

Will twists to face the source of it, and there's Hannibal, standing and streaked with blood, a coil of viscera in his fists and two dropped bodies behind him, smoke already lapping across their smouldering bodies.

This, Will thinks, has never compared to any image his youth ever gave him of hell. The devil was never so resplendent, and neither, he thinks, was any tale of salvation.

There's a tilt to Hannibal's mouth that hints of smiling, and a delirium to his eyes that hints of imminent collapse.

"I was fond of that shirt," he says, stepping forward and stumbling, faintly. Will stands to meet him, to offer support without knowing if he has it to give.

"You came," Hannibal adds, and the softness in his voice is so far from anything Will has ever known from him. He opts for pragmatism as a more comfortable alternative to accepting what Hannibal is telling him with those two words.

"Sit," he tells Hannibal.

There isn't a lot of strength left to him, but there are things to clear up. He lowers Hannibal to the ground and doesn't question why he's doing it so gently, or why he's letting his arm stay across Hannibal's shoulder for a moment longer than simple physical support requires.

Will stands up abruptly as Hannibal tilts his head sideways, trapping the flat of his hand against his collarbone.

"The evidence," Will explains, though Hannibal does not appear to need the narration. Will pulls the plastic camera from the ground, studies it, pops open the clasp, and as Hannibal's gaze sinks down, he pulls the SD card from the casing, dropping it into the well of his pocket. The flames around the two men are growing higher and it's too late to salvage any clothing from them; their jackets and trousers already smouldering and acrid, and a new smell of barbecue rising from them. Will pulls instead at the fallen body of Kazinski, peeling off the outer layer of her padded jacket. It's damp from arterial spray, but only in patches. It's long, for proportions less broad than Hannibal's, but it's better than nothing. A quick rummage through the pockets reveals a foldable knife, keys, and a phone. The items find their way into the pockets of Will's trousers. There's no other layer of clothing that could be pulled from her that wouldn't further desecrate, so Will instead pulls her to rest on the fire, coughing as the heat singes through the crown of brittle hair. It's no more dignified than peeling the cloth from her skin, but it seems the simplest removal of evidence, for when it's found.

He drapes the jacket across Hannibal's damp shoulders, and when Hannibal makes no move to dress himself in the undersized garment, Will pushes each arm through the sleeves in turn,

reassured by the thin murmuring of protest as the fabric skims the inflamed skin on Hannibal's back. He's conscious, but delirious.

And they're both freezing, dehydrated, and functioning on the barest of energy.

"Did they park near here?" Will asks, pulling Hannibal to standing. Hannibal's legs look sickly in the growing light of the dawn, trembling around the contours of muscle and sinew, streaked and smudged with blood and ash. It looks the aftermath of battle and Will isn't sure that either of them are the victors. A spark of lucidity fires in Hannibal's eyes and he answers in the positive, pointing to a break in the tree line.

"Forty nine footsteps that way," Hannibal says. Will nods, moving to wrap an arm around Hannibal's middle but remembering the slow forming heat blisters hidden by the coat. He grabs instead for Hannibal's arm, hoping the leverage is enough for the both of them to get out of the tangles of woodland without falling.

"Your leg," Hannibal comments, and if his face weren't obscured by the puff across his eye or the crusts of brown-caked blood streaking across it, Will would swear he was smiling beneath it all. "You can still walk."

Will says nothing; this doesn't seem the time for petty retaliatory remarks about Hannibal's penchant for savouring damages done. If he thinks about the sensations wringing through him right now, he'd assure Hannibal that there's such a confusion of cramps and nerves and adrenalin that he's not sure he can feel anything at all, and he thinks this could apply to his emotional response to their situation, too.

He knows that if his only aim was to remove Hannibal from this world, that he would have no better opportunity than now. With so much damage already done, with a knife in his pocket and nothing but the wilderness around them and an escape waiting, it could be no challenge at all.

That isn't what's stopping Will.

It's not even the arm that pulls away from his, curves around Will's middle, prompting Will to lift his own above Hannibal's shoulders, careful to rest it away from where the fire pulled at the skin.

It's that it's not the right endgame. Circumstance has yet to converge in a way that makes Hannibal's neutralisation *inevitable,* even now.

They fumble through the next twenty three footfalls together, Hannibal wilting and Will nauseous from the effort. He doesn't think about Hannibal's bare feet against barbs of wood and bramble, or of the way Hannibal barely responds to it.

"Why did you *let* them take you?" Will asks in an echo of the question posed to Hannibal so many hours before.

It's ten more footfalls each before Hannibal speaks, and there's a shimmer of black visible through the trees. The jeep. Their self-contained rescue vehicle.

This time, Hannibal's smile breaks through the mask of congealed blood and it's a grinning, proud thing.

"You know why," he answers.

The next footfall sees Hannibal stumble, dropping and pulling Will down with his weight, and it takes more energy than Will believed he had left in him to pull the two of them back up to standing.

It's *not* that he won't break free from the many tethers that join him to Hannibal, eventually.

It's just that now, now he's being practical. Now, they both need each other, to pull each other up and for support. Will hopes he means this only in the most literal sense.

Will uses the keys in his pocket to unlock the passenger side of the jeep, to guide Hannibal inside as he fumbles through the crevices of the car for anything to help them. There's bottled water in the pockets of the front door and its presence alone feels like a blessing. Beyond that, there's tarp in the boot, with speckles of red dried onto its shining surface. A woollen blanket, and a loaded gun. A bag of oatcakes. A bottle of vodka, opened but almost full. On the backseat, there's a pouch with a syringe, and a vial of clear liquid with no label. It's a mixture of mementoes to the experience, and trinkets to survival. It should be enough.

Will nudges Hannibal to coherence, putting the water bottle to his lips.

"Drink" he instructs.

The largest incision in Hannibal's chest is still leaking; thinning streaks of red splaying over too-tensed muscles.

"You will have to help stitch this when we get back," Hannibal says as he pushes the water bottle away. Will drinks from the bottle, remembering Hannibal's threat that he would need to learn the skill of stitching, and he's only slightly pleased that this time, he's not the one being sewn up.

"Back *where*, Hannibal?"

Will stills his own shivering, takes the blanket and arranges it in Hannibal's lap, pulling the top of it up to drape across his shoulders, covering his arms and looking away from the sliding expression of indignation that pulls across Hannibal's bloodied face.

"Plock. Piaskowa," answers Hannibal, closing his eyes as though in meditation.

The words sounds like scattered consonants with no discernible meaning, until Will lets his thoughts steer away from abject panic and back to the pragmatism that will get them through this.

Back to the house they were kept in, hours before.

The street names, and the road signs he passed.

Piaskowa, with its furnished front yards and politely manicured neighbourhood, on the turning from Gromadzaka, three corners left and a junction out into the country. It's a route back west, in thin daylight, a drive that will provide another pause in the journey towards their inevitable precipice.

Contact

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The house is easy to find in the cool daylight; unremarkable and nestled amongst the greens and bricks and greys. Will picks the lock with as much casual discretion as he can manage. There are hedges and shrubs shrouding the neighbouring houses from full curtain-twitching potential, but the shirt he's in is caked in dirt; crusts of dried blood stark against the muddied white, with accents of fresher red from where he'd checked on Hannibal throughout the journey. It's the sort of thing that stands out. That, and he's about to pull a bloodied and now unconscious man from the passenger seat of the jeep.

Hannibal is an atlas-weight in his arms, damp from the blood and oil on his skin, and Will's trying not to knock him as he drags him into the house, his heels catching on the ridge of the threshold and skidding across the carpet. He can feel his muscles crunching under the stress of keeping them both up but he doesn't see any alternative. He lays him on the carpet and shuts the door behind him, noting the smudges of dirt and red already flecked across the corridor from Hannibal's earlier internment, and closes his nose as best he can to the scent of death sitting heady in the stale air.

The priority is cleanliness; the deep cut on Hannibal's chest, now tentatively clotting, and the burns on his back, now sticking where the too-small jacket had pressed against the raised skin. Then, the swelling on Hannibal's face, and the rest of the stripes and bruises mottling his skin…those, Will thinks, Hannibal can deal with himself.

Will tries to wake Hannibal, to encourage him to take some of the weight for the slow crawl up the stairs and to the bathroom, but he's greeted with only a thin hum of noise and Hannibal's head lolling toward his chest.

By the time he's navigated all thirteen steps and the heave into the empty bathtub, there's hardly any breath left in Will's lungs.

But, there's time to think.

Isn't this what you wanted?

Hannibal, incapacitated, unconscious, and neutralised.

A stolen phone, and the first chance at contact with a world he's only heard about through Hannibal's restrictive filters.

A house, filled with the comforts and trappings of functionality, like a reminder of things Will could have had access to without needing to ask for permission, if he'd only extricated himself from Hannibal.

If he ignores the two bodies in the kitchen.

Or the detail of this house belonging to one of those bodies, and the necessity of fleeing its confines before anyone else can catch up to them.

Listening to Hannibal's thin and steady breathing, Will waits for focus to find him. He's shaking, still, and he thinks it's from exertion, exhaustion, and the general failings of a body that's been put through more than it should have to bear. He's staring at the swelling spread of soured red from his leg and the way it's discolouring his torn, muddied trousers, and he knows that despite the wreck of flesh he's contained in right now, he's in the best position he could have hoped for. He makes a mental note to set his sights in these matters a little higher, if he gets through this.

His escape is a few careful communications away; the right contacts at Quantico, to take the warnings to not underestimate Hannibal as a form of gospel. To ensure that nothing is left to amateurism or ignorance.

Will stares again at Hannibal, still doubting that he's fully removed from consciousness, still expecting that he's listening in to his thoughts, somehow.

He feels the sense of isolation that's kept him guarded for so long dissipating, and it's the promise of what the phone in his pocket will lead him to, he thinks, that's pulling the veils away. It's the hope of a redemption he'd thought himself lost to, and not, *not*, the proximity of the monster he'd pulled from the fire, and now sees rendered in human form.

Between washing the blood from Hannibal's injuries and scouring the house for useable drugs, blankets, phone chargers and supplies, Will is learning. The phone, his tiny portal to the internet, is slow, but already he's learnt that Jack is awake, and has chosen to decline the offer of early retirement, instead now back in the employ of the FBI. He learns of Bella, and the clutch that momentarily tightens around the inside of Will's ribcage reminds him that he's still subject to feelings not wholly skewed by Hannibal.

He's learning, through Freddie's infuriatingly artful words, that he himself is no longer thought to be a willing participant in his trek across Europe. He swallows the observation down, not entirely sure if he would accept or deny it. He also learns, as he checks the sheets in the bedroom for cleanliness, that he is still considered to be dangerous, violent and unstable. He takes in Freddie's assessment, and finds no defence for it.

He's learning that the FBI are very interested in talking to him, and as a thud echoes from the bathroom, he learns that Kade Prurnell is currently the subject of a new investigation. He reads the word 'bribery' before he locks the phone, secreting it behind towels in the laundry cupboard.

A second thud confirms that Hannibal is awake, and moments later Will is stood over where he's sprawled in the bathtub, taking thinly breathed instructions.

“Body temperature needs regulating after a trauma” Hannibal says, and he’s reaching toward the taps and hissing in frustration with each misjudge of distance.

Will doesn’t say “*I know*”.

Will doesn’t explain “*that’s why I wrapped you in a jacket, despite the cost to your skin, because the bits of you that weren’t singed were turning grey*.”

Or *“I didn’t want to fill the tub with warm water in case you drowned while I planned your arrest, as my tolerance for irony is not* that *great, all things considered.”*

Instead, Will leans to the taps, turning both to a steady stream and guides Hannibal’s shoulders back so that if he does sink out of consciousness again, his head will fall back to the lip of the bath, not forward and underwater.

“Will. You’re shaking.”

Will freezes, a heartbeat, believing that his newfound secret is written across his skin.

“You will be no help if you collapse” Hannibal tells him in a slow, slurred breath. “We’ll mend each other.”

It takes a moment for Hannibal’s words to fully penetrate, for Will to understand that the trauma being referenced is own, and then Will finds himself horribly aware of his own skin, and the shivers running through it, running parallel with threads of nausea but still not as much pain as he’s used to. Adrenaline, he thinks, is quite the gift.

“I’ll get a blanket” Will tells Hannibal, leaning to turn the taps off as the water level reaches the upper levels of Hannibal’s chest. There’s still an orangey haze around where the water clings and wraps around the hairs of Hannibal’s skin, but the water is reassuringly clear beyond that.

“No. Join me.”

In the rush of blood from his head from standing up, Will feels his balance waver and he grips onto the side of his bath, Hannibal’s point illustrated beyond argument.

It would be sensible, he knows, to heed the advice.

Too many hours with nervous tension, violence and no sleep would make for a potentially careless contact with the FBI, and there’s a chance he’d feel better if his vision wasn’t clouding and his head wasn’t aching. And at least with Hannibal in the state he’s in now, even as close to him as this, there’s little chance of him initiating anything Will would need to protect himself from.

Will unsticks the now barely white shirt from his skin, dropping it on top of the jacket he’d peeled from Hannibal, and pulls at his trousers, teeth gritting as the fabric rips at the hole in his leg. The gauze peels away and there’s white inside the wound, mixed with the mess of cut tissue, and rationality tells Will that this is the sign of antibodies working around the injury,

fighting the incursions of fabric fibres and dirt, but the memory of Hannibal's…*invasion*…of it, it lurches through his windpipe and he has to steady himself again.

Will climbs in to face Hannibal, his feet threatening to skid on the bottom of the tub, and tucks his legs between where Hannibal's are splayed, knees up and back resting against the jut of taps.

"For anyone else, I'd question the hygiene of this," says Hannibal, his eyes closed and a slow seep of red mixing with the now muddied bathwater. "But this is –"

"Stop it."

It's enough to share the warm space, to see the dirt and fluids clinging to each other's skin, but the narration of it is too much. Will pulls at the plug beneath him and twists to turn the taps back on; it's not an elegant solution to the need for cleanliness, but the slosh of water is some small reassurance, hot on his back and drumming through him like a rushed baptism.

Hannibal doesn't challenge Will's rebuttal, and this is how Will knows he's faring badly. This is good; this is the opportunity for Will to claw back all that's been taken from him, and to do so without the near omnipotence of Hannibal's influence. It's just that, as he's padding at his own skin, trying to scrub the dirt from him with a flannel and starting to *feel* the stretches of skin which have been torn and sliced and gouged, he's still too aware of Hannibal to allow the idea of separation to fully grasp him. He's washing himself, and worrying about the spread of infection from his own ragged wound in his leg to the fresh gaps in Hannibal's chest, and as Hannibal wraps a hand around Will's, looping his fingers around the damp, shaking joins of Will's knuckles, Will lets himself take the comfort from the gesture. It's okay, to allow himself reprieve from the relentless confusion about all this. It's okay to accept what he has to do, and to let the intimacies he's still embroiled with run in parallel to that.

Hannibal leans forward, gestures as though he's trying to help clean the stinging gape in Will's leg, and Will kicks out in protest, splashing water over the side of the bath and pushing Hannibal's hand away.

"No."

It's also okay, he assures himself, to allow himself some definition of his boundaries, and to reassemble them fresh from where he's allowed them to be demolished.

Neither of them speak for long minutes, the stream of water offering solace from the unspoken things between them.

Will scrubs at his skin, eyes away from Hannibal's.

"You asked why I let them take me."

Will stops, eyes Hannibal warily, and doesn't recoil when a hand presses warm against the tautened muscles of his left calf.

“And you told me I knew,” Will answers, still piecing together the possible answers that Hannibal believes him to have.

“You know, but won’t admit,” Hannibal says, and his voice is slow, heavy.

Will nods encouragement.

“You had the chance to return to Poznan, to ensure your exoneration,” Hannibal says, and this is not an answer.

“And I’d have run into worse than I escaped.” answers Will with a lung-draining sigh. It’s starting to assemble into some form of sense. “It was me that led them to you the first time. It would have been the death of me. *You* told me that, after.”

“You didn’t know that when you had the chance to run,” says Hannibal, and he looks pleased.

“And you did.”

Hannibal strokes at the skin of Will’s leg, still seemingly unable to lean further forward and punctuate his words with any more cloying proximity than he’s managing right now.

“If you’d gone,” Hannibal says, “it wouldn’t have mattered to me then. If the others had caught you.”

Will finds himself splashing water into the gap in his leg as a distraction, as though he could cleanse anything from himself right now.

“I’m not sure that’s true, Hannibal.”

Hannibal considers, his face shifting, and Will wonders if he’s reconstructing the possible outcomes that might have befallen him if he’d turned tail. Hannibal’s split smile, cut with a look of something wistful, tells Will that he’s right.

“It would have been fair,” Hannibal concedes.

“I don’t think either of us can claim *fair*ness to our actions” Will says, and he’s splashing water across his skin with renewed vigour, shutting out the creeping calm of Hannibal’s assessment with practicalities and avoidance.

“But I promised you that if you betrayed me again, that I would ensure your downfall,” Hannibal says, and he’s smiling again, his hand climbing up Will’s leg and his grip strengthening. “That is a fairness to my morality. It’s honest.”

Will understands that to Hannibal, that’s the only thing that matters, and doesn’t call him out on his definition of *morality*.

“So when I left the house…” Will says, not responding to the thickness of the threat in the air, “you didn’t fight, because…”

“Oh, I did fight,” Hannibal answers. A laugh leaks out of him as he says it, and his chest heaves with the effort of it. “I just misjudged, perhaps.”

It’s an unnervingly human response.

“I needed to know if you’d come for me,” Hannibal says. “And you came.”

Will isn’t sure if Hannibal’s words mean that he’s passed the unspoken test he’d been set, or if he’s failed some intrinsic duty to himself.

He takes comfort in knowing that whatever his motive or the calibre of judgment, he’s still, somehow, not dead, and that, he reasons, has to count for something.

The first email that Will drafts is to Jack. It only takes him a short while to remember the passwords to his email accounts, pulled from Greek mythology and present in his memory from a time before he knew Hannibal. He writes it in the short moments between laying Hannibal on the bed and making excuses to find nightclothes for himself in this stranger’s house.

It’s a simple message, devoid of any emotive response to anything he knows of Jack’s situation. There’s nothing to be gained from pithy sympathies, and if he knows anything of Jack at all, then the chance to catch Hannibal will be consolation enough, all things considered. All he tells Jack is the locale he’s in, that he’s with Hannibal, and that if Jack doesn’t receive any other word from Will within five days, to come and find him. He’s very clear that he is not to come any sooner unless called. The arbitrary time frame is important, Will says, to ensure that he can close a net tight enough that Hannibal can’t slip from it. Any longer than that, past the five days, and it’ll be too late. Will doesn’t spell out the words for Jack, but if he’s not able to make any more contact within that time, with his plan to turn Hannibal over, his chances of having survived will be bleak to none.

Chapter End Notes

I am sure that nothing could possibly go wrong and everything will be JUST FINE. No, really!

As always, thank you SO MUCH for reading. Feel free to say hello at tumblr: mizumono-survivor-support x

Precipice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The email Jack sends in reply is brief, but it promises a lack of avoidability. *Sit tight*, it tells him. *We're on our way*, it says, and *we're going to bring you home*. Jack understands the need for brevity, and there are no questions about allegiance, and no enquiries as to the whys, the hows, or the wellbeing of either of them. They're beyond that, now. Will turns the phone off, secreting it at the back of the laundry cupboard, and heads to the kitchen to brew a fresh tea to rouse Hannibal from his sleep.

It's three days until Hannibal tries to initiate any more contact than just heavy touches on Will's arm that hint at fondness but feel like exhibitions of strength returning. Hannibal has accepted the small arsenal of painkillers raided from the drawers and cabinets of their adopted home, and he's allowed Will to dress his wounds, stitching them with a curved needle and nylon thread, on the proviso that Will tested his technique on himself first. The two of them are broken, and engaged in a stubborn display of not revealing the extent of the fact, to themselves or to each other.

Hannibal is sat on a beige sofa in the living room, leafing through a book that Will can't interpret the title of. His face is still swollen, but his left eye is now wearing the receding smears of blacks and yellows. The vividness of its original red only remains in the form of a blotch in the white of Hannibal's eye, a damage that Hannibal swears has not impacted his vision.

The scent of death has only recently been purged from the house, with saws, cleaning fluids, and enough clingfilm and vinyl wrap to keep the waste contained. Hannibal had appeared to take no satisfaction from the orchestration of the process, and his dulled and irritable mood carried through the days.

"If you insist that we stay here any longer, we'll need more food than this house is stocked with."

Hannibal has taken to posing problems for which there is no immediately solvable solution. If he's noticed that Will has adopted a more confident, less tolerant approach to their dynamic, he isn't referencing it explicitly. Instead he's providing small, prickly challenges; as though if Will is to prove himself a leader in any capacity, he has to prove that he is capable of it.

Will answers Hannibal with a cup filled with soup; a thin infusion cobbled together from the herbs in the back garden; rosemary and savory; and the thinnest of stocks pulled from the larder; tinned vegetables and dried seasonings. They're far from starvation rations, but

Hannibal's palate is proving harder to appease than his mood. There's no money in the house beyond shrapnel, and any of the luxuries they'd carried across Europe are lost to them now, left in Poznan.

"Drink your soup," Will tells Hannibal, sitting next to him and letting the warm liquid from his own ease his throat. It's good, by the standards he's acclimatised to and the resources available to him. Perhaps, he considers, serving it to Hannibal in a black mug with sparrow patterns on the side was an antagonism too far, but he watches as Hannibal drinks all the same, and watches with thin satisfaction as he curls his mouth with faint distaste, then resets his expression back to neutral.

"Thank you," Hannibal says. He's a terrible patient, and Will is a terrible carer; his own movements punctuated by the growing discomfort from his cut leg, his clumsy sutures splitting from the swelling inside the wound from infection not yet tended to. But still, Will attempts to nurse Hannibal back to full capacity, knowing that with every dressing across the burns of his back, with every antiseptic applied to his chest and every icepack offered to his face, he's helping Hannibal get back to a position of strength that will be harder to overcome.

He's still got this under his control.

"We need to supplement our medical supplies," Hannibal tells him, another sip of the soup and his book now discarded. "Antibiotics, at least."

"We will " Will assures him. "When only *one* of us gives the facial impression of…"

Will tails off. He hasn't had to address the detail of his disfigurement these last few days, and this is one of the benefits to sharing Hannibal's company; there's no recoil and no distaste, not at his skin, at least.

"Thuggishness?" Hannibal suggests, and he's smiling, the swells around his eye rolling and curling with the movement of it. Will wishes he wouldn't.

"Yes."

Hannibal rests a hand on Will's arm, prompting him to put his emptied cup down.

"You have a distorted view of yourself" Hannibal tells him, voice low and oddly comforting. "You're still trying to frame a view of yourself inside other people's perceptions, and this is why you are perpetually unsatisfied."

"Inside *your* perceptions?"

"Your view would be far more favourable if it were that simple."

Will doesn't think that 'simple' is the right word.

"I'm not worried about how I'm seen," Will says. "Not anymore."

"Are we still talking about physical vanity?"

Hannibal is winding his hand around Will's arm as he speaks, kneading through the thin cotton of the t-shirt. His thumbs track across a puckered pink line below Will's shoulder and it's hard to tell how much of this is being done in the interests of physical intimacy, and how much is just to remind Will how much of him he feels ashamed of, every scar some proof of his failure to protect himself.

"I'd say not, wouldn't you?" Will answers, matching the gesture on Hannibal and being careful not to skim his fingers across his slow-mending parts.

"I had wanted to show you my home town," Hannibal says, now still.

"*Had*?"

"If we have been found even in these remote places, there is no question that they would be ready for us the moment we entered the borders of Lithuania."

Will doesn't register any surprise at the referenced destination. From the map he'd assembled in his mind across those long and unpleasant drives, to the scattering of knowledge he had of Hannibal's history, the location makes sense. He wonders if, by being told – *invited*, even – he'd passed the unspoken test set for him by Hannibal. To be allowed to see the parts of him defined not by his strengths, but by pain. Vulnerability. Humanity.

"There is an ugly unavoidability to being hunted," Hannibal continues, and now he's holding onto Will. If Will didn't know better, he'd interpret the gesture of one seeking comfort.

"Not confident you – we – could overcome them, this time?" Will asks, and he's pulling Hannibal closer to him. It's a wonderful *impression* of intimacy, right now, with Hannibal's sweat-damp forehead resting against his neck and his voice coming out in murmurs against his chest. Will assures himself that the warmth he's feeling, curdling through him and softening the sharpest edges of his loathing, it's a temporary thing.

"I'm reluctant to bring more violence to that place," Hannibal answers. "And not when the motives of those seeking us are as bland as revenge."

Will agrees, and this part doesn't feel like an act. "There's something banal about revenge for revenge's sake."

Hannibal nods in reciprocity, and his hands are under Will's t-shirt now, and his touch has shifted from gentle to possessive. Fingertips knead at ribs, and Hannibal's mouth sits damp at the fading purples of Will's neck.

"Does this mean you do not feel you owe me revenge?" asks Hannibal, and Will freezes for half a heartbeat. Hannibal *can't* know. He shakes it off, falls back into his role, praying to forgotten gods that he's not been so transparent.

"There's nothing that remains that would be fixed by it," Will says, curving his spine into Hannibal's grasp, now splaying across the muscles of his stomach and sides. It isn't revenge that's put his fingers to the keypad of that hidden phone, or even justice. It's survival, the only way Will knows how.

“Not even for what I do to you now?” asks Hannibal, and Will feels the reassurance of dread filtering into his nerves, and the associated swell of tension pulling through him as Hannibal slides his hands beneath the too-loose fabric of Will’s trousers, fingers toying at the back of him.

“You’re not *well* enough to do those things now,” Will says, and he’s pushing Hannibal away by his shoulders, playfully, not firmly. *He still has control*.

Will moves to stroke at Hannibal’s forehead, to reassemble the pretence of amicability, of agreement and of sense. He misses the swift withdrawal of Hannibal’s right hand until it’s pressing against his windpipe, and Hannibal’s voice is hot in his ear.

“I am as well as I decide to be,” he says, and Will coughs out something like regret at trying to pacify him. For forgetting that even in the act of affection, the monster would always find a way to come to the surface.

“I’m…not,” Will says, throat rough as Hannibal softens the pressure.

Hannibal looks affronted before he looks disappointed, and he appears to take in the view of Will, cataloguing the abrasions, the scent of him and the expression, and seems to concede there to be some truth in Will’s words.

“That rarely poses an obstacle for you,” Hannibal observes, and Will changes position so he’s sitting more upright, closer to Hannibal’s eye level.

“That rarely poses an obstacle for *you,*” Will corrects. He’s keeping a hand on Hannibal’s arm, careful to maintain the contact in lieu of the supplication Hannibal has come to expect from him.

“You’re resentful, still.”

“Not resentful,” Will answers. He’s being cautious; too much defensiveness, and he’ll give himself away. Too much submission, and he’ll be back where he started. “Just restructuring my boundaries.”

“You believe they were exceeded.”

Will doesn’t scream at Hannibal for his glib understatement. He doesn’t point out that *fucking into a wound that Hannibal cut into him* could be considered an exceeding of boundaries by even the most generous of observations.

Instead, Will nods.

“Yes.”

He doesn’t challenge Hannibal on whether he agrees.

“Are you denying that you invited that experience?” Hannibal asks, and he’s all but crawling over Will as he says it, manoeuvring them both so that Will is twisting, and, as Hannibal has always had him, beneath him.

This isn't a battle Will is equipped to fight. There is no way this discussion could go that wouldn't have Hannibal speaking loops around his arguments, tangling them into something indiscernible until Will would have no impression of events beyond what Hannibal would supply him with.

"No matter what you claim," Hannibal continues, "you still seek out ways to put yourself in harm's way."

Will feels his trousers being undone with steady fingers, and concedes that this is probably the safest course of action, right now. To uphold the pretence. To go along with it.

"I still intend to be the source of that harm."

Will absorbs the words as though they were bitterly medicinal, reaches to pull open the buttons of Hannibal's trousers, committed now to the inevitable. His arm is pushed away, and pressed firm into the fabric of the couch.

"You'll pull your stitches," Will warns.

"And yours too, I imagine," Hannibal says.

Will kicks, then. The small horror of his injury now the source of a vulnerability that even his promised escape can't override, he's not sure he can cope with any fresh threats made against it.

Hannibal presses him back down with the sheer weight of his limbs, arranged across the bones and tired muscles and keeping Will down, on his back and looking up at Hannibal.

"Don't."

Hannibal smiles, then. A calm and serene thing with glinting edges where his teeth show through it.

"Very well. We'll find your new boundaries, then."

The pressure lifts from his arms, and Will feels his trousers pulled off his hips with a solid jerk of movement, and he knows he's responding to it, knows his body is reminding him that he's still a little confused about what's part of a game, what's for show, and what he needs to protect himself from.

"This will only be what you want it to be," Hannibal tells him. "You know the word that will make it stop."

Will finds that his head is shaking, and he's trying to discern what it is about…*this*…that he's so opposed to. It's not the act, he knows. It's not even Hannibal; for all he's determined to see this through to the end, he's still prepared to mourn the intimacies shared when he's later denied them. It's not even the use of a supposed safeword as a trigger – the key to making everything stop being the name that would unravel him far more than any scene, always skimming around his thoughts as the reminder of *why he's doing this*.

It's just, Will thinks, as his shirt is pulled over his head and Hannibal pulls his legs up in a way that stretches at the stitches and draws an unwilling gasp out of him, it's that he wants a chance to experience things without a constant backdrop of *pain*.

"This house is equipped with few tools for anything more artful," Hannibal says, dampening a finger with saliva and pressing it carefully around the ridges of Will's entrance. "And I've looked. Thoroughly."

Will freezes as the digit squirms inside him, feels himself flinching around it.

The phone.

Turned off, and secreted between folds of towels and tablecloths, and *hidden*.

He wants to question *how* thoroughly Hannibal looked; whether his secret was found out in those rare stretches of uninterrupted sleep, but there's a second finger pushing in now, stretching and wavering, and Will's deciding, as the air pushes out of his lungs, that if this is the end of him, if he's been found out, then this is how he'll go, and he may as well pull the last threads of enjoyment from the horror he's committed himself to.

"Will."

Will shifts, realises he'd shut his eyes.

"Are you with me?" asks Hannibal, patient, still. The sign that he's not yet immersed in what he's doing.

"I'm with you," Will answers, keeping his arms down, allowing Hannibal full control of how much contact is exchanged between the two.

There's another stretch, and now Will is writhing into the contact, the press of fingers against his insides, the tension loading up behind them more distracting than any fear of being destroyed.

"You are, aren't you?" murmurs Hannibal, and his free hand is resting on Will's chest, pushing into knotted lines of pink skin and slowly sinking the air from Will's lungs as his fingers creep toward the dip beneath his collarbones.

"You let me have you like this," Hannibal says, and he's pushing more inside now; there's a sting and a feeling of something being off-kilter, before his muscles adjust and the sensitive spots inside him start thrumming with desperate want.

"But you shouldn't underestimate how much you have me too."

Will finds himself searching Hannibal's face for signs of betrayal, for the silent beat before the crack of fury, and it isn't there. There's concentration, and there's reverence, and there's something close to peace in the way he manipulates his fingers, pushes in past the second ridge of finger joints. Will doesn't highlight the differences between having and being had. .

Will can feel air swirling in his lungs, not quite able to escape or to reach the hungering aioli, and he can feel the rushing paths of his bloodstream, converging around his cock and heating his skin and it's easier to not think, when the fingers inside him are flexing and the hand on his chest is holding him still.

"Breathe, Will."

Will does, deep, and feels the shift of his pelvis and the pressure against it, feels the push of more than the three, *four* digits, and now it's back into the realm of pain, of a pressure past tolerance, just. He can feel the protest rising in his vocal chords, a quiet gasp building to a whine, and then Hannibal's fingers creep from his chest to his open mouth.

Will expects them to close around it, to clamp and shut the sound out, but they pry instead and there's soured sweat and skin on his tongue.

The form inside him spreads, heats his blood and he's too *full*, too *twisted*, and this is what suits him, he knows; everything just past the point of *okay*, and everything *too much* in order to feel like anything at all. He's sucking at the fingers in his mouth, less as a performance and more to complete the feeling of taking all of Hannibal *into* him; his taste, his strength and everything he offers him, bending and warping Will to his own form.

Somehow, Will feels more in control of Hannibal, this way, with his fingers vulnerable enough to the bite of his teeth and his movements working in time with the short stutters of trapped breaths.

The reward is all Will's; his desperation beading inside him, making no move to reciprocate even some of this, for fear of breaking the moment, or easing the pressure back to something bearable.

"So many ways for you to come undone," Hannibal's saying, and the bite that usually accompanies the observations isn't there. It's teasing, but it's not a threat. There's nothing sharp in Hannibal's hands, no straps or buckles holding Will down, and it's almost gentle.

"Am I really the puppeteer of all you've done?" Hannibal asks, and his fingers are at the back of Will's teeth, saliva slicking them and leaking from the side of Will's mouth as he twists to accommodate them and this way, Will can't speak to scream at Hannibal that *now is not the time for fucking wordplay*.

Then there's the twist of a wrist inside Will, a clenching of fingers and then a splaying and *fuck*.

He's shouting, the hot sensations of being forced around Hannibal's arm more than he can keep contained, and his own hands are creeping round to where his cock is curved almost flush against his belly.

There's a shunt inside him, and the smallest, hyper-sensitive pressure around the trunk of Will's cock, and this is how he comes; hands skewering him at both ends and his body shaking. He slackens as Hannibal smiles, hungry, and he's hollow again; the slow withdrawal of fingers and fist and the quick cooling of sweat on shaking skin.

Will waits, a beat, expecting a punishment; something to counter the generosity of sensation gifted to him by Hannibal, and when it doesn't come, when all he hears and feels is breathing hot against his neck, Will thinks he understands. Boundaries.

He's wondering if Hannibal heard his unspoken plea to let this be something without pain, this time, and he's still wondering how deep inside each other's heads they are as he shuffles down the couch, still on his back and lifting Hannibal off him, up him, in short and clumsy bursts of strength until Hannibal follows his lead and Will's mouth finds itself pressed against the fabric pinning Hannibal's cock down.

He pulls at the opening of the trousers, balancing the weight of Hannibal's thighs on his shoulders and chest, shuffling the fabric out of the way.

It's not elegant, this. It's hungry, and Will could swear that he's doing this because he *wants* to. Because he wants the taste of Hannibal across his tongue, wants to swallow him, consume him, and he thinks this is a suitable goodbye; it's a matching of intentions and, as his tongue laps at the swollen head of Hannibal's cock, it's a small way of undoing Hannibal, without cruelty.

"This may be more comfortable for you if I were to move," Hannibal says, the last word swallowed as Will rolls his tongue around Hannibal's shaft, taking as much of him into his mouth as his cautious gag reflex allows. He doesn't try and answer Hannibal; just grips the flesh of his hips and holds him in place, relaxing the muscles of his throat and inhaling the sweat from the thatch of hair on Hannibal's crotch.

Will thinks that the reason he wants this isn't just about consumption or goodbyes. It's a requiem of sorts; a way to revisit the trauma of their last interaction and restructure it; mould it into something he has control over, something that won't see him patching up the holes and more intrinsic damages done when it's all over.

That, and the immediate gratification of Hannibal gasping unintelligibly.

Will moves Hannibal around him, pushing him up enough to tease at the skin with his rough tongue, to threaten lightly with teeth, and then to clench his grip and pull Hannibal onto him, into his throat in a way that he's ready for, to feel himself stuffed with him, nose pressed into hair and just stopping short of choking and this, Will thinks, this is a good farewell gift. He's controlling the muscles of his throat as best he can, still savouring the way that he's *technically* in control but wholly taken over by Hannibal all the same. He's feeling the swell of pressure pushing against the wet skin of his mouth, and his fingers are clawing into Hannibal's skin as he feels him discharging. It's a *lot*, nearly too much, and Will's neck convulses with the effort of swallowing it down, the taste of it scouring his insides. For the heavy breaths that follow, his mouth feels tacky from the taste and the remnants his tongue hasn't yet swiped clean.

Hannibal's thighs are shaking. Will pushes him up, off him, just enough to manoeuvre himself with his head closer to where Hannibal's looks hung between his shoulders. Will drapes an arm lazily around Hannibal's tensed shoulders, pulls him closer and brings their mouths together, passing the taste of come back to the one who'd gifted it and smiling into the kiss, teeth still too present and too many flavours, all of them hot against his tongue.

“You’re different to the person who came out here to find me,” murmurs Hannibal, sinking down to lie next to Will, visibly worn.

He drapes an arm idly across Will’s back, the fabric from his shirt sleeves sticking lightly to sweat-soaked skin.

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Will asks, and it’s gently said, even if there’s resentment in the truth of it.

“To a point. But, perhaps, I was limited in my perception of what it would cost me.”

Will stiffens, stills, and waits.

“Tell me, Will,” he’s murmuring, and he’s stroking Will’s face and he’s close, uncomfortably close, the way a boa gets close to its food. “What is it going to cost me?”

Chapter End Notes

I have run out of internet again and so am updating this from a computer which is not my own...so sorry if I am slow to update and respond to things here!

The end is getting awfully, horribly near. Thank you all for sticking with this and for the millions of encouragement and my boss can see me right now so I'd better go x

Transform

Chapter Notes

The pause before the thunderclap...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What is your transformation going to cost me?”

It takes Will a moment until he can answer. He can feel Hannibal’s arm sticky on his back, and they’re both coiled and pressed so close against each other, as though this way, they could stop any ugly truths from spilling out into the spaces between their skin.

The scar on Will’s belly itches from the contact.

In this moment, there are two possible Hannibals. There’s the Hannibal who is applying insight and conjecture into the combination of circumstance, offering Will the chance to present a version of himself that could continue to live by his side in a capacity that won’t kill either of them.

The other Hannibal, the one asking Will what the cost of his transformation is, this Hannibal knows. This Hannibal has scoured the hidden corners of the house they’re occupying, has found the phone – too deliberately concealed to be anything less than a damning secret, and is waiting for Will to make his move.

Both versions are keenly aware of the potential for betrayal, but the second version, Will knows, would not be so generous as to gift him survival a second time.

“Are you worried that my changing won’t afford you so many opportunities to…debase me?” Will asks, and he’s praying that he’s addressing the first version.

“I would argue that your transformation would encourage me to do so with more vigour.”

Hannibal is kneading at Will’s back now, and it’s still not clear if he’s speaking in the cryptic terms he applies to their intimacies, or if it’s a threat. His deft fingers find the sensitive tissue near the base of Will’s spine, and press. Will’s recoil from the spasm of nerves is trapped by Hannibal’s grip, and instinct has Will biting into the space between Hannibal’s neck and shoulders in retaliation, quieting his own pained shout against the damp shirt fabric.

“Especially if the cost to me is to be your repeated attempts to attack me,” Hannibal says, and it sounds soft, fond, even, but he’s pulling at Will’s hair to stop the bite. Will considers that as his neck is not yet broken by the movement, Hannibal may not suspect as much as he could.

“It’s instinct,” Will tells him, and he’s feeling more like this is the game, and not the thing that would kill him. There’s a smile on his face, and this is *flirtation*.

Hannibal twists, curves himself so that he’s straddling Will, hands pinning his forearms into the sofa.

“Then clearly you need to learn some better behaviours.”

Will twists himself free of Hannibal’s grip, wrapping his hands around the tensed muscles of Hannibal’s wrists, and pulls him down so they’re closer to the same level.

“And I imagine you’ll teach me,” Will says, and there’s softness and a promise in his voice. “But if you want me to remain able to fit dressings to your back, maybe we could just clean up, for now?”

Hannibal allows the deflection, and sinks down fully to Will’s level.

“Some lessons are better as surprises,” Hannibal says by way of agreement, and all the fear of discovery seems to sift out of the air, with nothing but a threat of aggressive intimacy to replace it. Will feels relieved, and questions that maybe he’s also feeling anticipation too, and that of all the things he should be focused on right now, this is not the most helpful.

Will waits until night before he tries to act any further in his own defence. The last few hours have presented him with a kind of calm that he rarely feels entitled to. He’s re-applied the dressings to Hannibal’s back, and wiped the stitches on his chest with vodka, a compromise of hygiene after the antiseptic cream ran out. With every careful swipe of cloth over skin, and with every quiet contact, Will had felt his insides contracting with unspent guilt. He’d guided Hannibal to the bed and persuaded him to swallow a couple of the tablets that would encourage a less pained sleep, and had feigned taking two of them himself once he’d dabbed alcohol to the hole in his leg and wiped away the evidence of seepage. They’d arranged themselves under the blankets, a loose twining of limbs with the least disruptions to their cut and broken patches, and they’d lain there, not speaking, just letting the sound of the other’s breathing lull them into rest.

It takes an hour of Will lying coffin-still, with his breathing slowed to a sleeping pace; in case he can be heard; until it seems a suitable time to move.

He feels sick.

He pulls himself free of the warm bedding and the heavy comfort of Hannibal’s arm on his back, stepping onto soft carpet and bracing himself for the pull of sinew as he stretches his leg, and for the corresponding tension in his stomach to unravel.

He moves from the bedroom in a quiet stagger, pulling the door gently shut behind him, enough that he'd notice the difference in light if it were to open. The laundry cupboard is only a few feet and a corner away, and Will has done this before, but that was when Hannibal was less functional, and less at risk of waking in a heartbeat or a breath.

The phone is slow to turn on, the charge having depleted despite its lack of use; there hasn't been enough privacy to move it anywhere it could benefit from electricity. Will measures out the minute it takes the internet connection to register in long, quiet breaths.

If he focuses on the stress of getting away with what he's doing, he doesn't have to focus on *what* it is that he's doing.

The house remains completely still, and Will logs in to his email account with sweating fingertips. He doesn't give himself time to read any of the new messages waiting for him; just types out the address of the house they're in, and gives a timeframe of twelve hours.

It's not too late, he knows, to stop this. To abandon the current course of betrayal, to scoop Hannibal from the bed and for the two of them to drive as far as the petrol in the tank will carry them, and to leave Jack to yet another disappointment.

Except, Will knows, that to do that, to remove them from the path of danger, would mean acknowledging there was danger in the first place, and that Will created it for them. It would be tantamount to confession, and Will doesn't know that he'd survive this one.

His thumb hovers over the 'send' icon, with the battery counter behind it flashing a warning and he's trying to work out if there is any better option for him.

He thinks of how it felt to be understood, and then the quiet voice in his head reminds him that he should maybe focus on how it felt to be undermined, instead.

He thinks of the acceptance that comes from someone knowing him, from seeing the unspeakable things in his head and embracing them, and he thinks of the physical closeness he's savoured, and how all of these things will not be found, not fully, anywhere outside of Hannibal.

And the quiet voice in his head gets louder, demands that Will considers what he's had to put up with in order to reap such small benefits, and the voice reminds Will that he's not doing this for vengeance, or for justice, even. It warns him to hurry up, to stop dithering with his thumb over the screen and to heed the flashing red battery light. It tells him that for all the other reasons he might have wanted to see Hannibal contained, the only one that really matters right now is his *survival*. Another month in Hannibal's company, it warns him, and he'd be tormented beyond recovery. He'd have Hannibal's voice in his head telling him that it was okay, and he'd be defined by nothing more elegant than his ability to endure whatever new torturous amusement Hannibal would choose to visit upon him. The quietly shouting voice paints a picture of him, vivid enough to feel, to smell, of himself as incomplete and butchered, of the legs that could carry him away cut away from him, carved up and searing over open flame, of Hannibal whispering in his ear that this is simply a natural extension of healing, and of Will leaning into his comforting touch because really, he'd have nowhere else to go.

As though in agreement with the voice, Will's back twinges with the pressure of built up tension in the damaged discs, and Will knows that he has to listen to this voice, and the way it's all but screaming at him.

"Will?"

Will blanches as Hannibal's figure looms hesitantly in the doorway to the bedroom, eyes not fully open but still pointed at where Will has his arm in the cupboard.

Will presses the send button, sees the red battery light flash for another handful of seconds, and turns to Hannibal, feigning a lack of terror.

That his instinctive reaction to Hannibal is one of fear *should* be reassurance enough that he's done the right thing.

Will slides the phone between the folds of tablecloths as the battery light switches off, pulling out a towel and facing Hannibal.

"I felt sick" Will explains, not considering that he shouldn't have volunteered an explanation if his actions were benign. At least, he acknowledges with a curl of nausea in his throat, it's not a lie. "You okay?" he asks Hannibal by way of a deflection.

"I dreamt that you had left," Hannibal says, and he sounds as though he's still partially asleep, still too human to sound like the monster Will knows him as.

Will tries to smile, a lopsided heartless thing, then feels his gut clenching, and queasiness surging through his chest.

He's across the corridor and on his knees before Hannibal catches up to him, and he's heaving out a surge of acidic stomach water, coloured with threads of barely digested vegetables and souring his throat and the air around them with the stench of it.

Hannibal's hand is in his hair, pushing the damp tendrils away from his forehead. Will heaves again, less coming up this time but still enough to shake him, the muscles at his core feeling hot and weak from the exertion of it.

It's stress, Will knows. He feels the subsidence of the nausea, replaced with acidity and too many textures near the back of his throat. His legs are shaking underneath him, still, but it's a low tremble; the kind that disperses when the position changes and the smell of vomit leaves the air.

"You need antibiotics," Hannibal tells him sleepily, and Will thinks that this is an overreaction to something as ordinary as throwing up. He pushes himself off the ground, flushes and moves toward the sink, Hannibal's hands guiding him there with a warm pressure on his shoulders. With the kind of care and attention that he's just willingly forsaken.

There's a dim echo of sickness in his gut again, but not enough to force itself out. Will reaches for a toothbrush, shaking lightly as he puts the paste across its bristles.

“This is unpleasant for *me*, and I don’t have your sense of smell,” Will says, before scrubbing the brush against his teeth.

“It smells no worse than your leg,” Hannibal says, and his hands are massaging the skin around the stitched hole, tentative and light.

“Don’t,” says Will, spitting out the bitter froth of paste from his mouth, rinsing the brush under the running tap water and trying to purge the taste of his own stomach from his mouth.

“You haven’t kept this as clean as it requires,” Hannibal says, and his voice is sounding less sleep-slurred by the second.

The angry indignation that would have risen to the surface, it isn’t there. There’s a hum of resentment, but it’s the residual noise of a problem that’s now being dealt with. No point getting cross about what’s already been done.

Hannibal presses, now, and Will’s backing away from the sink, reaching for the towel to dry his hands and trying to shake Hannibal’s hands from him.

“You have an infection.”

Will laughs, then. It’s a cold, biting sound, but it’s sincere; through all the sickening discomfort, of all the analogies he could apply to Hannibal’s effect on him, the thought of him as an infection seems the most fitting.

Hannibal is kneeling now, his face at a level with the wound, and he’s pressing it, and Will isn’t looking, but he knows there’ll be something leaking from it as he applies pressure. Knows that the scent of it will be like something rancid. His stomach curdles again, and he grips onto the sink to keep it in check.

“If it’s making you sick, it means it’s already poisoning your blood” Hannibal says, and this is far too dramatic a description of events for right now. Will knows the extent of what the human body can suffer before something like septicaemia can pose a likely and viable threat. He knows, too, that Hannibal’s medical expertise is far more advanced than his own, but also that it is exceeded by his need for theatre. Will thinks that he can appreciate the increasing symbolism of the injury cut into him by Hannibal – injuries, *plural* – being the things that are tainting the very blood that courses through him.

Will *can* survive this.

“We need to leave here,” Hannibal tells him, and Will nods in agreement. They *are* leaving here, tomorrow, no matter what. “We’ll find a pharmacy. And some sustenance that doesn’t taste of the tins it’s been stored in.”

Will finds himself laughing again, an involuntary, easy thing, because Hannibal’s mouth is kissing the skin above his wound and for all he’s expressing concern over Will’s health, he’s still preoccupied with his damn appetite.

“We need to sleep,” Will answers.

“Not if you’re in danger of vomiting. I won’t deny that there’s a beauty to you when you choke, Will, but I would prefer it to be in more favourable circumstances.”

There it is.

The deftly delivered reverence, the fondness for suffering that Will can’t help but find himself bending to, thinly veiled by a pretext of caring.

Will knows he’ll miss this.

“I’m fine,” he tells Hannibal, and he’s reassuring himself with the words. “But I need to sleep before we plan any break-ins to drugstores. Robberies. Subterfuge. Whatever else you have in mind.”

“Let me at least get a fresh towel. Otherwise you’ll sweat through the bed” Hannibal offers, standing up and looking pointedly at the one on the floor around the base of the toilet.

“I’ll get it.”

Will tries to keep his voice steady, to hold down the fear rising in him that Hannibal could go to that same cupboard that holds the hidden phone, and discover the object of his betrayal.

“Together” Hannibal tells him, and they’re back to supporting each other with clammy hands pressed against bare skin, each of them hindered by different factions of disability as they walk back across the hallway.

Will opens the door to the cupboard, Hannibal pressed too close to him for secrecy or discretion. He pulls a towel from the higher shelf, knowing that nothing can be revealed from this, and that the phone is a shelf lower, secreted between table cloths and embroidered place settings.

“You want one too?” Will asks, not expecting Hannibal to, but practicing his calm voice.

He feels Hannibal shaking his head, then sees a hand reaching across his peripheral vision, into full focus as it rests on the folds of table cloths.

Will can feel his breath escaping him as though being tugged toward a vacuum.

“The owners of this house had fine taste,” Hannibal says pleasantly, his fingers stroking the patterned linens. “It seems a shame that we cannot spend more time appreciating it.”

And with that, Hannibal withdraws his hand, ushering Will to the bedroom. No reveal, and no consequences. Will wonders when he started experiencing the favourable edge of luck and chance, and then tells himself not to question something so fragile.

“To sleep, then,” Hannibal says as they enter the unlit bedroom and recreate the tangle of limbs that had started the night. “I imagine you’ll need your strength for tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and for reacting, or just poking other people and sending them in the direction of this thing! I am going to do my best to update a little faster but external factors keep slowing me down. Again. And it's you who have kept me motivated and full of the warm fuzzy feels and here I go again, ruining the tone...but, thank you.

No one seems to believe me when I say that this is not going to end in absolute tragedy, but...well, it'll all be fine. I know I've said this before, but it will. Really.

Retribution

Chapter Summary

> “Man is always prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them.”
>
> - Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sleep doesn’t find Will easily, but he doesn’t expect it to. Just the resting of his limbs is enough, even with Hannibal’s weight twined around him, tension loaded into every breath that crackles into the air between them.

From the movement of moonlight through the curtains, he guesses he’s let around four hours pass in this way; Hannibal breathing deep and low, and himself still trying to stop his legs from cramping and his arms from deadening under the weight. Sleep finally happens, in short unpleasant bursts, bringing with it a series of snapshot nightmares; Jack, spine cracked and neck unhinged, and blood on Will’s hands, and then a pause for wakefulness to clear his thoughts again. The next time Will closes his eyes, he’s staring at the walls of Baltimore’s hated hospital, feeling the crush of being somewhere so inescapable, the pricks of needles peppering his skin, the pageant of restraints, and when he looks down at his hands, he sees Hannibal’s and not his. Then, he’s watching himself straddling Hannibal, prison-shorn hair in his fists, and Will watches himself smack the back of Hannibal’s head into the stone floor, feels the heat of blood and brain on his hands and sees only a proud and empty smile from the dead shape on the floor.

He blinks himself awake, and the next time his eyes close, he’s feeling Hannibal wrapped around him, feels fingers splaying the curls of hair on his head, and feels the tear of a knife in his stomach, feels the path of it ripping upwards until it’s a gurgle of blistering red at the back of his throat, and he hears a whisper asking *what did you think would happen* as he gasps back into consciousness.

The hand on his chest is warm, holding him in place and pulling him back into the curve of Hannibal’s chest. There’s daylight spilling through the curtains, and a thin heat that makes the bedclothes sit clammy against their skin.

Will backs further into Hannibal, embraces the comfort for as long as it can be believed. Hannibal’s hard against him, languishing against his skin.

There’s no clock in the bedroom, but there’s a metronomic countdown echoing in Will’s thoughts, measuring out the final minutes of placid interactions between the two of them.

Will doesn't have a plan, as such.

He has knowledge of pressure points, of the heavy ornamental objects in the house that can thud heavy against the base of a skull, and of the belts hung in the wardrobe which could hold a body immobile, and the rolls of electrical tape stored in the utility cupboard. All things that Hannibal knows of, too, if his exploration of the house was as thorough as he'd implied. And all of its usefulness hinging on Hannibal not predicting Will's intentions fully enough to prevent them.

Will feels a hand pressing and parting his cheeks, and another creeping up his chest to his throat.

His blood feels thin, and his head feels loose on his shoulders, and he thinks that Hannibal was possibly right about the wound in his leg being the cause of more than simple stiffness.

He's still moving into Hannibal's touch, allowing the slow dry rut against him, and twisting an arm behind him to pull Hannibal closer, his fingers skimming the edges of bandages.

"There are things in this house we could be using to our advantage right now," Hannibal says, his breath close enough to feel like a mimicry of insects crawling over skin. It's an elegant way of asking, Will thinks, for him to go to the bathroom to fetch the small bottle of oil stored beneath the sink.

"Remain as you are," Hannibal says, pulling back from Will in a movement that Will stops with his legs. He twists round, feels a surge of nausea and bites it down before it can interfere.

Will corrects his earlier assessment; the outcome of these next hours depends on him not falling prey to his most familiar instincts. To not allow his inherent need to let himself be guided, twisted and reimagined in Hannibal's image cheat him out of what he's earned.

"Let me," Will says. "Let me choose the tools."

The smile Hannibal gives is a soft and curious thing. It's almost hopeful, and Will's seen this expression before.

He thinks he knows how he can use this to his advantage.

He pads out of the room, using the wall as compensation for the support his leg won't give him.

Will raids the downstairs first, skimming through the drawers in the kitchen for a vegetable knife; short, thick-bladed and sharp enough to cut fabric, or skin if it's called for. Will hopes that it isn't.

He knows there's a gun in the jeep outside, and for a short moment he considers it; he could stop with the dalliances and dances and simply disable Hannibal with something as infallible as a hot bullet through the tough flesh of his belly. Stop him from digesting proteins; *that* would probably piss him off more than any incarceration or injury.

Will knows, the way that any orchestrator of downfall knows, that he can't be as blunt as that. He's engaged in a narrative with Hannibal, and the version of him that wanted to plant a bullet in him is long gone. He wants to take Hannibal down, to a point, and then hold him suspended for long enough to let Hannibal be the one to drag himself the rest of the way. It's been so long with Hannibal inside his head that any retribution or sense of reckoning is now coloured with a need for aestheticism, and Will feels closer now to those stories of villainy and treachery. He knows, now, what it is to be the villain, and not, he prays, the victim. This time.

He gathers the electrical tape from the cupboard, hooking three rolls of red rubberised tape over his fingers. From the upstairs bathroom, he takes the remaining strip of bandages from beneath the sink, and tucks the oil into the crook of his elbow.

Most of what he needs is already in the bedroom.

Hannibal is upright when Will walks in, a predatory pose but still inviting, his back to the bed and one hand positioned to the side of his erection.

"Are you finding the restructuring of your boundaries to be an easy manoeuvre?" Hannibal asks, and he's smiling.

"I haven't tried a lot of manoeuvring within them, yet."

Will arranges the items as unthreateningly as he can, placing each of them on the bedside table with a kind of delicacy that he has no intention of imitating later. His own erection is a slow growing thing, stiffening his movements but not currently the sole motivator of his actions.

He turns away, reaches for the wooden handles of the wardrobe; for the belts and sashes hung on the inside of the door; and it's Hannibal's voice that interrupts him.

"I took the liberty."

Will pivots back as a strip of stiffened blue satin wraps across his chest, Hannibal's arms pulling it taut against broken skin. Will wraps his fingers across the fabric, yanking it with enough force to pull a grunt from Hannibal's lungs.

If Will had more finesse, he thinks, he'd have found a way to wrap the sash firmly round Hannibal's wrists and would have gained the upper hand with considerably more elegance than he's managing right now.

As it is, Hannibal's back has hit the sweat-dampened mattress and there's a swell of blood from his nostrils to the contours of his cheeks from where the back of Will's head made crunching contact.

Not elegant, and possibly more of a retaliation than a self-preserving move, but there's something satisfying to the point of comfort about seeing Hannibal momentarily upended this way.

The gratification has a short half-life; Hannibal is already launching himself from the bed and his hands are a rigid knot in Will's hair, pulling him backwards into an arch that Will's back can't support.

Will wishes again that his comeback had more grace to it, but his fists have made a lash of the blue satin and he's swinging it into Hannibal's face, following the momentum of the fabric as he twists, dragging it into a loop around Hannibal's neck, and he pulls.

The grip on Will's hair loosens, and the withdrawal of the sting and the pressure is enough freedom for Will to move himself onto the bed, thighs pressed tight over Hannibal's stomach and his grip on the fabric now challenged by Hannibal struggling to pull it from his throat.

The stutter of Hannibal's voice resonates with the force of a growing symphony.

"Are you boundaries now so narrow that you'd see me pinned within them?" Hannibal asks, but the words are coming out in crackles and uncaught breaths.

Will allows himself the moment to savour this. There's still a war of strength to be fought, and winning is not a finite concept.

"I'd say they've broadened, wouldn't you?" Will says. He's cultivating an impression of this being an extension of the game, and he's siphoning the reserves of his resolve to not let go of the performance and simply pulverise the wavering confidence from Hannibal's face until his knuckles show bone.

This would feel more dangerous if Will couldn't still feel the pressure of Hannibal stiff against where he's sat astride him.

He loops one end of the sash to the spines of the headboard, shunting Hannibal further up the bed so that he's close enough to secure the other without turning him purple and still.

The rest of the belts, pulled from the wardrobe by Hannibal in anticipation, are coiled beneath the pillow, and this, Will thinks, is fortuitous.

Hannibal's struggles are now mimicry and performance. He's *allowing* this.

Will doesn't let this deter him as he pulls one; a brown and dull looking stripe of leather; and snares Hannibal's left wrist in it, looping it through the buckle, round the outer edge of the headboard and then three more loops across the wrist before pulling it tighter through the clogged catch of the buckle again. It's secure, enough. And maybe a notch too tight for comfort, or for safety.

"Is this revenge that you are acting out?" Hannibal asks, the blue sash slightly looser around his throat with the repositioning of Hannibal's arms. "The trappings of your wrath?"

Will finds himself smiling, the muscles of his face still catching on severed lines not yet ready for the easy expressions of satisfaction. He pulls a second belt from the pile; this one a stiffer, darker hue of mocha and just as bland as the first. Hannibal's forearm is tensing, the veins rising against the veil of skin and it's a prelude to attack that Will knows from

experience. He shifts back as Hannibal reaches for him, uses both hands to turn Hannibal's wrist on its joint before it can reach his own throat.

"You said yourself that revenge was futile" Will says, and he's surprised at how calm he sounds. He coils the second belt around Hannibal's right wrist, then the frame of the headboard, and pulls until the resistance drops from it and Hannibal's arms go smooth and slack. "This is only an assertion of who you've been telling me I *am*, Hannibal."

There's a warning in Hannibal's eyes that Will wishes could be replaced by fear, or something akin to vulnerability, but he knows Hannibal enough now to know that there are some concessions to humanity that no amount of doubt could coax from Hannibal. And there's still the feeling of Hannibal's cock tilting against Will's skin, still proving that no matter what Hannibal is getting from this experience, he's allowing it to manifest in arousal.

"Who *you* are is still half hoping for me to tear myself from the binds and beat you into a state of malleability so softened that you would have no remaining concept of yourself," Hannibal says, and his voice is a steady, breathing thing again.

It's a lowbrow ploy.

Will leans across Hannibal, reaches for the oil and drizzles a thin smear of it into his palm.

"You may be delving into the role of authority," Hannibal says, his eyes focused on where Will is wrapping his cock with a damp fist. "But you still wish me to be the one to claim responsibility for it."

Will knows there's truth in this, somewhere.

Will knows that every interaction he's shared with Hannibal has replayed the same theme; he's been the one to seek a kind of salvation that won't allow for acceptance of his motivations. That each time, he's humoured a notion of overcoming it, and of overcoming Hannibal. And that every time, he's fallen back into the fate of Sisyphus; perpetually striving to reach the epiphany that would see him beat Hannibal, only to have the weight of his intangible fears drag him back to the start before he could reach it.

He can't let Hannibal beat him, this time.

This is his chance to defy the gods. And he knows that he's deifying Hannibal, again, but there's no point in challenging it anymore. Not when Hannibal's influence has become the force around which his thoughts seem to orbit and when his physicality has imbued every stretched and malleable part of him.

"This," Will tells Hannibal, "is all mine."

Hannibal twitches against the ties, and Will knows that if Hannibal were to argue the point, it would belie his confidence in his own manipulation. And if Hannibal were to agree instead, it would betray his desire for it to be the truth, against his better judgement.

Will shifts so that he's kneeling between Hannibal's legs, pours another thin puddle of oil into his hand and warms it. He's burrowing his hand between Hannibal's weight and the bedsheets, almost clumsy but rehearsed enough from his own memories of sensation to know where to apply pressure and where to only tease.

Will knows that any friction on Hannibal's back will aggravate the burns he's been working so hard to dress to recovery, and with this knowledge, he drags Hannibal a few small inches further down the bed; enough to put a strain on the belts and the sash, but not enough to restrict his breath to a point of danger.

Hannibal looks more put out by it than pained.

"If you wanted me to suffer, why did you stop the Kazinskis?" Hannibal asks, and there's a little more breath wrapped around his words, and there's a smile in there too.

"They would have killed you," Will answers, and he's pressing a finger inside Hannibal now, taking enjoyment from the squirm it produces.

"And you no longer desire that outcome."

Will shunts a second finger in.

He's still fumbling his way around the ownership of this situation, still unclear how much of this is him proving anything to himself, and how much is a simple way to colour the time more vividly until they're plucked from their circumstances by Jack.

The shift of Hannibal's hips beneath his reminds him that there's a lot more to it than that, and the heaviness in his abdomen tells him that Will owes himself more than simple gratification from this.

"We're past that," Will asserts.

He's leaning into Hannibal, resting his open mouth across the thin glaze of sweat on his chest, his teeth against the curls of hair there and his tongue finding the unbandaged edge of a cut. He wonders if he could taste Hannibal this way, taste the changes and vulnerability in him as he tries to draw them out. And as the flavours of salted metal and something burnt hit his tongue, Will thinks he'd like to keep this taste shut inside him for as long as he could sustain its intensity.

He should be worried by how closely his thoughts mimic those he sees in Hannibal's head, he knows. He isn't.

Hannibal's curling his legs up, failing at passivity and trying to enforce some calm retaliation. "I'm not so sure we are," Hannibal murmurs, and the chill that shudders through Will is chased by a hot need to see this through to completion.

"Past me killing you?" Will asks, and he's curling away from Hannibal, pulling his fingers out and wiping the thin trail of oil on the bedsheets. He reaches for the belts, finds a thinner leather strip with a pearlescent buckle, and for a moment considers using it for a whip;

visualises the stings and streams of pinks and reds that could raise up in its wake when applied to Hannibal's stretched skin…and as the thought reaches its pinnacle, Will finds himself imagining the bite of leather against his own back, instead. Hannibal, he knows, would never respond in the same way that he does. He wouldn't arch into it, let himself feel the pain leashing him apart. He'd treat it like a curiosity, and when that had been exhausted, he'd treat it as a nuisance. No satisfaction in gentle tortures for him.

Will tests the leather for strength, pulling it with enough vigour that he hopes will shake out his attempts to fall into old habits, and pushes Hannibal's left leg into a fold, calf against thigh.

There's a heel in the small of his back as he secures the loop, and it's confusing, for a second; the petulance of Hannibal asserting control despite his position, the pain it brings, it belongs in this situation, and it belongs to the way that Will's cock is arching and full and thinning his thoughts with its urgent need for more contact than he's giving it. Except, the pain doesn't belong to what he's *trying* to do.

Will twists, ignores his own discomfort with the motion, pulls Hannibal's right leg into the same frogged position and loops leather – beige, this time – around the tensing muscles. He's crawling now, between where Hannibal's mobility is limited, using the shape of his own body to splay the join of Hannibal's thighs and using the nails of his fingers to track lines up Hannibal's chest, running them in parallel to the scuffs already etched into him.

"I don't believe you capable of killing me," Hannibal says, and he sounds faintly disappointed with the words as he speaks them.

Will is grateful that Hannibal's doubts appear to be hinging on imagined murder, and not the more imminent confinement that awaits him instead. He presses his palm to Hannibal's jaw, spreading fingers over his mouth and holding it closed.

Hannibal looks as though he might bite him. Or at least like he wants to.

Will can feel himself smiling again; that unfamiliar creep of muscles on his face; and he's pressing his thumb against Hannibal's nose, his knuckle resting against nostril, and he squeezes.

Will counts out one long, leisurely breath and waits for Hannibal to react to the absence of his. Hannibal stares, defiantly stoic.

A second breath from Will, and he lets this one out over the hot skin of Hannibal's face.

He doesn't want to kill Hannibal.

He just needs to show him that he *can*.

Hannibal is leaking, and Will wonders why it took him so long to notice that the two of them share this rigid tendency to conflate the prospect of their own death with sexuality.

Will takes another breath and studies the changing hues of Hannibal's face, feels the twitching as he starts to protest against the lack of air. Will inhales, imagines how Hannibal would be able to detect the odour of breathlessness on the air, and moves his hand from Hannibal's mouth, replacing it with his teeth and with the expulsion from his full lungs. It's a way to invert Hannibal's insinuation into his every state.

Hannibal coughs into it, chest jumping and eyes glinting.

"I believed that I wanted you in the place of the Kazinzkis," Hannibal says as his breathing returns and as Will strokes at his cock, readying himself for the inevitable.

Will doesn't believe him – doesn't believe in any wish inside Hannibal's head that would see himself dead, or fully at Will's mercy.

"I'd watch you cut the organs out of me and sear them on the fire, feasting and embracing all you'd become, doing what they tried to but couldn't."

"You might have wanted me to *try,*" Will suggests. He's gripping the meat of Hannibal's legs, pushes himself forward, then in, feeling the hot tension of Hannibal stretching over his tip. He's imagining himself inside Hannibal's skin in ways less literal than his current position.

Muscle tightens around him, draws the distant ache into something urgent and hungry, and this is supposed to be Will taking control, but it feels like he's being consumed, like this, burying himself in the chasm of Hannibal's body.

"You wanted me to contort our… circumstance," Will says, skin heating and the blood in his veins quickening. "To see me…become."

There's a smile, open-mouthed and unconvinced, on Hannibal's face. And as Will moves more of himself inside him, feels the wet friction against his sensitised cock, he watches the expression shift into something slack and uncontrolled. He finds himself wondering if this is what Hannibal felt, all those times he pushed Will past sense and coherency, and he understands the insatiable draw of wanting to recreate this.

"You would find it enchanting," Will says in a whisper. "You would be captivated right up until… until you realised it was only narcissism that made you celebrate it."

Will pulls slowly back, not *out,* but creeping more friction into the movements and gripping at Hannibal's legs.

"Do you imagine I see you only as a gilded reflection?" Hannibal asks, and his voice is cooler, thinner. Serpentine.

Will shunts again, slower, knowing it's more infuriating to Hannibal than to him. He lets his words pulse out of him like slow leaking blood.

"I image you see me – this *version* of me that you reference so often – as a kaleidoscopic distortion of your reflection. A fractured impression of something you yearn to cultivate."

Hannibal only hums; thoughtful, distracted.

Will thumbs at the slit, and for a short and violent second, wonders what would happen if he were to take the knife to it. He's not as different as he's telling Hannibal he is, and somewhere, filtering through the shakes and tensions of biology, there's the wriggling terror that he's made the worst decision of his life. Will ignores it as much as nature could be ignored. Focuses on the feeling of his fist growing sticky around Hannibal, of his groin thrumming. Of the sensation of grinding machinery as he surges back in, and the heady looseness as Hannibal flinches around him.

"You'll see the fractures of the kaleidoscope," Will says, but his words sounds like manifestations of sweat, not language. "You'll…destroy the whole thing."

Hannibal clenches at the word *destroy* and Will wants to create an imbalance here; have Hannibal finish first as though it could prove anything to him, but it's not as easy as a plan, not with his entire sense of self feeling submerged in the swathes of damp heat from Hannibal, with sweat-glossed skin pressed close against him and everything feeling too hot and heavy for focus. Will speaks with more fervency to slow himself down.

"You're not going to fall into the water to chase your own reflection, Hannibal."

Hannibal answers him with a groan, and a tremble that shakes through where Will's fingers have him gripped.

"You'd fill it with poison and set light to its surface."

Will feels lighter as he speaks, as though shedding sandbanks of detritus and self-preservation tactics. He's held in place with a shudder that grips at him, and it's almost enough, *almost*… and yet there's still something stopping him from letting go. His fist grows wet as Hannibal jerks in his ties and Will's angling the spurt and drizzle towards Hannibal's chest, to where short globules fall against the cuts and bandages.

"You've already set fire to yourself," Hannibal says, and the air sounds slow to gather in his chest.

Will is at a disadvantage like this; still teetering on a brink of release, with Hannibal already sated and relaxing and regathering his wits.

"Are you saying I've been trying to seduce myself with the idea of you and missed the truth of you altogether?" Hannibal asks, eyes lower and the tautness leaving his legs. Will moves back, feels the drag of the motion and the need to release sat in imbalance against the growing, ugly knowledge that something is still missing.

"You're disappointed," Hannibal tells Will.

Will is heat and doubt and a bullet perched at the lip of a barrel, and he doesn't think that *disappointed* is the word for his headspace, right now.

"You imagined it differently," Hannibal tells him, looking relaxed in his contortions of belts. "You believed you would feel power to the same intensity as you do its inversion. But you don't believe yourself, do you?"

The pressure behind Will's dick is already feeling hesitant, already feeling diluted by Hannibal's words presenting themselves as truths and Will thinks that if he was being practical, he should just gag Hannibal and take what he wants from the situation without allowing himself to be disarmed. He strokes at his dick, pushes the tension back into it from his own hand and his own control.

It's fitting, somehow, that no matter how far inside Hannibal he can get in a literal sense, he'll always be the one feeling invaded.

"You're imagining *me* differently" Will says, and he's understanding that this is not about holding power over Hannibal; he's not sure such a thing was ever possible, even as he pushes his bound thighs into the mattress and angles his cock against the loosened, slick ridges of Hannibal's hole. It's about severance, and his own survival.

"Your fantasies," says Will, pushing in and feeling only the thinnest resistance, "are very different to mine."

There's no symbolism that Will can take from the way he propels himself into Hannibal, clawing at the skin of his chest and forcing every strength left to him into the piston-motion of fucking. He's not undoing Hannibal, but for once he's not undoing himself, either. The giddiness of the thought speeds him, flushes heat through him and turns his skin to knots. He's been so lost, and he has no anchor in Hannibal, and his mind is trying to tell him that he won't let go of himself until he can understand why he has to do it this way.

Hannibal's insides shrink around him, tense and shivering, and he's opening his mouth to speak again.

"Don't" Will is saying, his head growing lighter. He's getting rid of everything Hannibal has done to him, not just to his body, but to everything that used to exist in his orbit. He's not destroying it; just pulling it away from him for long enough to allow himself a chance to reassemble the broken bits without the constant threat of teeth wanting to tear them fresh. It's a gift to himself; a way to survive, and an idea that he *deserves* to.

Skin contracts around him, and Will's breathing in gasps. There's a pulse inside his skull, and then there's the tremor of anticipation, and then there's the purge.

It shakes out of him and as soon as Will assembles the metaphor of leaking out the elements of him he wants gone, his mind is helpfully reminding him with each levelling breath that really, he's gifted them to Hannibal. Pushed them inside him, as though he could change him from the inside out. Or maybe, he thinks, sitting back on his heels and cursing his instinctual need to translate each experience into analogies, he thinks that he simply wanted to ensure that no matter what is set to transpire between them in their rapidly shrinking time together, he wants some sense of still being *with* Hannibal.

Will lets himself sink, lets the strength drop from his bones.

He didn't intend to let his body fall so close to Hannibal's, but his face rests comfortably against the rising and drop of Hannibal's bandaged chest, and there's an abstract kind of

safety from the proximity; skin can still touch skin, but there are no hands to pull at his hair and bend him into any new shape.

Will wonders, if he'd tried this sooner, if he could have stood to spend more time with Hannibal, this way.

There's a kind of peace, albeit temporary.

"It is customary to offer some sort of reprieve from bondage once a mutual orgasm has been achieved," Hannibal says with a reassuring lack of composure. "Or are we not adhering to such etiquette?"

Will remains still, facing sideways so that his view is of the damp tuft of hair in the pit of Hannibal's arm, and not of the expression of displeasure colouring his words.

"In time," Will says, mouth against skin.

Time is in ever-decreasing supply, and Will has yet to consider a way to make his presentation of his captive to Jack into something dignified. It may be more than Hannibal deserves, but even by generous standards, Hannibal's current condition could be deemed tasteless.

"I'm not averse to a continuation," Hannibal says, and he still sounds undone. He sniffs the air pointedly before continuing. "But there is a very real possibility that your disability may yet render you incapable of much more movement."

Will would like to be able to dismiss Hannibal's threat decorated as concern, but he can feel a pulse around the hole in his leg and a sickness in his throat. It's not as bad as Hannibal says. And Hannibal should know.

"We're fine," says Will, and he finds that he wants to laugh, because nothing about anything could be described that way. "We'll be fine" he adds, just to test out the feeling of a lie so momentous on his tongue.

"I know," says Hannibal, and it sounds like a chastisement.

Will breathes in the scent of Hannibal, the sweat and steel and burn, and he knows, if he's honest, that he will miss this. And he knows that he will miss it more than he appreciates his own continued survival, because it's easier to focus on things lost more than to see what remains. But it's the thought of *not being dead* that reminds him to stay here, to not pull Hannibal from the bed and drive before Jack can reach them.

He thinks, by now, he'd be too late for that anyway.

Hannibal speaks again, and now his voice sounds steadier. Weighted.

"You took something from the Kazinkis, did you not?"

Will feels his head growing weight and a pulse behind his eyes. He has nothing to lose by confessing, but there's still an uneasy truce in place that he doesn't want to upend until the

last moment. Hesitancy colours his voice as he answers.

“I took…”

“Evidence, you said.”

Snapshots play behind Will’s eyes until he understands the inference.

He took the SD card from the camera. He’d told Hannibal this, amongst the fire and the blood and the stumbled crawl to safety, and since they’d arrived in the house, Will had been so preoccupied with the phone, and with recovery, that he’d given no thought to what to do about the souvenir, kept in a kitchen drawer.

The SD card. The proof of what those people had done to Hannibal, and the false sense of justice they’d been planning to share with those wealthy enough to seek compensation for what Hannibal had taken from them. And the proof that their venture had been curtailed by Will launching into a clumsy attack. The proof of Will’s complicity.

“Evidence of the Kazinskis,” Will says, and he feels Hannibal’s shoulder tensing.

“No,” says Hannibal simply.

“No?” asks Will, and feigning ignorance in Hannibal’s presence has never been an easy thing.

“If I were to be caught and apprehended, it would be wise for something so explicit to be kept out of the hands of the law, wouldn’t you say, Will?”

Will’s breathing is shifting, eking out in shorter bursts of tension.

“Are you anticipating apprehension?” Will asks.

“Of course.”

Will reminds himself that all he has to do is breathe, and wait for Jack’s party. At this point, even his own prospective incarceration isn’t as fearful a prospect as time spent with the man shifting back into monster beneath his weight. If Hannibal didn’t know before, Will’s responses have made it abundantly clear that he’s planned something.

“Then what’s to be done about the evidence?” Will asks. He should move. He should pull himself from the cooling skin he’s pressed himself into, he should dress himself, and he should fight the feeling that he’s sinking into a pool of red made by Hannibal’s hand.

“I’ve dealt with it,” Hannibal says lightly, and his muscles tense beneath Will again, and this time there’s more rotation in the taut muscles beneath Hannibal’s collarbone.

Will misses the cue to jump backwards as Hannibal’s left arm swings towards him, hand made into a claw and fitting brittle against his throat.

“Stiff leather tends to unfurl faster” Hannibal explains, politely, his knuckles locking and squeezing against Will.

Will scrabbles against the grip, pulling himself back as he catches sight of the right arm unhooking from the bed post.

He won't let this happen.

Not like this, and not when his failure to win would mean more than simple *suffering*. He jerks back, curls his right hand into a fist before he's caught his breath back, and swings hard and fast into Hannibal's face, watches the closing of his eyes and feels the thud of Hannibal's skull against the headboard reverberate through the bed.

Hannibal is still conscious, but slowed, and still pinned by the loop around his neck.

Will grabs at one of the discarded belts, pulls Hannibal's wrists together and wraps, fast, and only slightly too tight. Already, Hannibal is trying to gather leverage to swing the knot of his hands upwards, and Will is faster, this time; he pushes the arms back, up, knocking them into the headboard and crashing knuckles against metal. He's pulling electrical tape from the reel next to the bed with his teeth, and he's wrapping it across the belt, across the wrists, and round the top edge of the headboard until half the roll has gone and Hannibal has conceded his defeat.

"I promised," Hannibal says "that if you betrayed me again, I would destroy you."

Will pulls himself from the bed, stands, as though expecting each of the bonds to break. And maybe, he thinks, he'd like a little distance from Hannibal's words. Some chance for them not to sidle under his skin, or to rattle through his skull.

Will nods, reaching for trousers, as though he had any dignity left to assemble from the situation, or any shield that could protect him, now.

"Promises are subject to the conditions in which they're made," he offers. It's a weak attempt at pacifying.

"Have the conditions changed?" Hannibal asks, and there's a glibness to his voice. As though he still has the upper hand, despite all physical evidence to the contrary.

"You wouldn't have expected me to become you," Will says. "You're proud, I think, of how much you got inside me…"

"Which I believe I will miss" Hannibal interjects, and Will can't decide if he wants to laugh or punch Hannibal for the crudeness.

"I think you'd have been disappointed if I didn't try," Will says instead, and he watches as Hannibal's expression shifts, dampens, and grows fond. "You don't want a reflection of yourself."

"I always found the story of Narcissus to be a dull analogy for the human condition" Hannibal agrees.

"So this is what you wrought," Will says, his voice softening. "And now it's up to you what to do about that. What did you do with the evidence, Hannibal?"

Hannibal smiles at this, a low slung devil smile. He's silent.

"You knew," Will says, and it's not a question, and Hannibal doesn't answer it. "You guessed I'd planned an escape." Will doesn't let the knowledge of being predicted crush him. "You could have stopped me, Hannibal. Properly. Not just…lashing out at the last minute. Why didn't you?"

Hannibal's smile has gone, and he looks stricken. He lets the silence in the room gather before he breaks it.

"I did not know until you told me," Hannibal says, and he enunciates the word 'know' as though it were a riddle. "I knew of the potential for you to do something, and I knew you'd been pushed too far through endurances, perhaps, to wish to continue our arrangement."

Hannibal does not take responsibility for pushing Will through those endurances, and Will doesn't force the issue. He's still dressing himself and trying not to catch the brunt of Hannibal's wounded expression.

"But I also know that whilst you are better than me at being alone, Will, you do not relish it. And I know too that when you are in the throes of unruly sleep and seeking refuge from your mind, that you reach for me without consciousness there to interrupt you."

Will feels something knotting at the inside of his throat and he swallows it down.

"So, I hoped," says Hannibal. "And I trust that what you believed to be an escape will not be as freeing for you as you perhaps wished."

Will's eyes feel hot and he tries to blame it on the fever.

"Is this it?" Will asks, and he's toeing his feet into socks, into shoes. So that if he gets taken in too, he's at least got a pretence of composure. "We both go down together?"

Hannibal says nothing for a moment; waits for Will to finish buttoning a shirt across his raw chest, and stares without sympathy as Will loses balance momentarily as his injured leg falters beneath his weight.

"You believe that the loss of my liberty will contain me," Hannibal says eventually. "That I'll no longer rattle inside that head of yours. What will you do, Will, when your thoughts turn to death and I am not there to blame for it?"

"Oh, you'll always *be* there, Hannibal. This isn't about separation. Or severance."

Will sits at the edge of the bed, resting a hand on a folded leg. These belts, he notes, have not come undone.

"Then what is it?" asks Hannibal, and Will feels the dulled thrill that Hannibal still doesn't know his every thought.

"It's self preservation," Will says, and he smiles at the way Hannibal makes a sound of mild distaste. "And about asserting the self that I'd like to preserve."

“You think I would not have let you do that?”

“*Let* me,” Will says. “I don’t – I shouldn’t – need per*mission* for that.”

“No. But you still seem to enjoy having to ask for it.”

Will has no defence for this. He’ll acknowledge it, and consider why he wanted – still wants – to let Hannibal creep inside his thoughts and bend his body to his whims and take so much control from him – but now is not the time for circular self-analysis of his inherent masochism.

“Jack will be here soon” Will says instead. He’s spoken it out loud, so it’s real, and unavoidable. Like pointing out the tidal wave surging across the horizon, too close to outrun.

“I would prefer to greet him with something covering my genitals,” Hannibal says, and some of the weight of their exchange dissipates with Hannibal’s prudish indignation.

“And I would prefer to greet him with the knowledge of whether I’m to end up in a cell next to yours or not,” Will answers. He doesn’t add that he’d prefer to greet Jack with a face that was as whole as when he last saw him, or with a body that wasn’t shivering and on the verge of collapse, but he’s never been used to getting what he wants.

“A truce, perhaps?”

Will stares at Hannibal with familiar mistrust. A truce is an unlikely outcome of any negotiation.

“I’ll go first” Hannibal offers. “Your evidence came in a very small package.”

“That’s not an explanation” Will says, and this is how he knows he’s exhausted and under par, because he’s usually faster to assemble the meaning behind the crypticisms.

Hannibal only flicks his tongue to the side of his mouth in answer, and Will feels the thoughts clicking into place.

“You *ate* it?”

“Wrapped, of course. It delays the decision of whether to use it or not for a short while at least.”

Will doesn’t know why he expected any better from Hannibal. He takes his hand from Hannibal’s leg and calculates the safest way to dress him without risking further injury, knowing full well that he has no way of offering a similar future threat in relation to Hannibal’s dignity.

He pulls trousers from the wardrobe; the last pair, and an unflattering shade of grey marl, and tentatively unbuckles one leg. Hannibal remains still, and lets Will pull the fabric up to his knee.

It's not worth leaving it to chance, Will decides. He wraps a belt around the ankle and secures it to the foot of the bed.

"This is not the way most citizen's arrests are conducted," Hannibal says gently as Will pulls the second trouser leg on.

"I'll clean you up," Will says, and wonders if the snippets of good grace he affords Hannibal would spare him from the threat wielded over him. He doesn't count on it.

"You're right," Hannibal says, careful and thoughtful as Will pulls his other leg to the centre of the bed, joining it to the other one. It's Jack's safety he's concerned with, now; if Hannibal won't come quietly, he wants to afford Jack as much advantage as he can. Because if Hannibal gets free, Will knows that the both of them may as well be dead.

"The conditions have changed," continues Hannibal, and he sounds muted, quietened. Will wouldn't go as far as to suggest powerless.

"Does this mean you're reneging on your threat to destroy me?" questions Will, leaving the room to find a flannel to dampen and clean the mess from Hannibal's chest. When he returns, Hannibal looks crushed; eyes damp and mouth curled down, and Will feels a thread of something like guilt running through him and cuts it off before it can twine through him.

"Or are you accepting that you've visited enough destruction on me to rebalance the scales?"

Will dabs at Hannibal's chest, tries to catalogue their equivalent injuries and feels himself ready to cave with the nausea that surges through him.

"However this is to unfold, you will be no more free than me, Will."

Will thinks he knows the truth of Hannibal's words, and they *burn*.

There's the sound of a car outside, and Will thinks that if this is Jack, then this is clumsy; that any warning system would be a risk.

The sound swells with other motors, and Will watches Hannibal's expression sink from wistful into a dulled kind of resignation.

"I prefer the world with you in it," Hannibal says, and now, Will feels an ache somewhere more intimate than just his muscles and his bones. This, he knows, is what he feared; that he'd made the worst decision, and that he's just cut himself off from the only opportunity he's ever had to be understood. He sits on the bed, close to Hannibal, listening to the sound of movement outside the building.

"I think the feeling is mutual," Will says, and he surprises himself by meaning it. There's comfort, he thinks, in having the horrors of existence contained in a relatable human shell. "You won't kill me," he says, and he thinks he believes it. "Re*venge* is no reward for you."

"Destruction is a thing entirely separate to death. You're of more value to me alive and outside," Hannibal says as a fist thuds against the door.

Will strokes at Hannibal's face, feels him leaning up to him despite the tension around his neck, and completes the tentative gesture of a kiss. He expects the bite when it comes; teeth around his bottom lip and creeping across his jaw, and Will feels skin breaking as the downstairs door cracks open.

It's fond, in the only way that Hannibal knows how to be fond.

Will's pulling back, and calling out that they're upstairs, head spinning and muscles shaking.

"Goodbye, Hannibal."

Jack says nothing of the scene or the circumstances, but his expression is an essay of horrified bewilderment. He directs the team of officers with blunt and efficient precision as they extract Hannibal from his place on the bed and place him into more conventional restraints. He waits as Will lunges for the bathroom, and waits until the sound of retching quietens, and Jack's there when Will takes two steps onto the landing before his legs turn boneless and his face whitens, and he's pulling Will up by the arms before he can hit the ground.

Will expects the click of handcuffs over his wrists, but instead the shout comes for EMTs and he's just being held, upright, not pinned but supported, as Hannibal is led past him.

"I trust that you will visit me, Will," says Hannibal, his head pushed downwards as he's escorted ungently down the stairs. "It would be more civil, for you to come by choice, don't you think?"

The threat lingers, and Will knows that Hannibal was right; that escape is too abstract a concept for two people like them, and that victory could only ever be pyrrhic. And as he's lifted onto a stretcher, he thinks of Sisyphus; the man doomed by the gods to relive the same recurring fate, and he knows that for once, he pushed the metaphorical rock right to the top of the mountain. And as he's carried outside, still no cuffs on his wrists and nothing but the straps to hold him steady, he knows how lonely that view from the top felt. And with Hannibal's invitation – *demand*, perhaps – to stay close, he knows that he's back to where he started. It's just, he assures himself, as the doors to the ambulance close and the engine stirs, he's confident that now, with everything he's survived and everything that awaits him, he's not being crushed by the weight of it anymore. It's not that he's safe; for as long as he's connected to Hannibal, such an idea is a myth. It's that right now, the lure of acceptance is finally a safe enough distance away for him to survive it. And, as the chemicals begin to pour into him and oxygen sits in a mask across his face, there's a small hope that lets Will imagine that surviving Hannibal won't always have to equate to suffering him. Perhaps it's the oxygen, or optimism, or simple delirium, but Will lets himself sift into unconsciousness with the dim reassurance that for all he's fucked up, for now, he's *okay*. And he can stay this way, for as long as Hannibal remains contained, and content to let him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this took a lot longer to finish than planned. It always does, I guess. It took even longer after Digestivo aired; there were a few thematic crossovers between what I'd planned for the ending, and what then actually happened, and this is why I'd wanted to get this story finished long before S3 aired. Other fandoms fear being Jossed, and we...well, we see fics made canon, and I sincerely hope someone coins the term 'Fullered' to articulate the utter joy that comes from seeing that happen. This is by no means a claim that I think that all these horrible words I have written belong in the Fullerverse, not least because there is a limit to the number of Cronenberg references I think they could squeeze into the show (and there's the small matter of all the ferocious bumming). I digress - I just have a lot of feelings about, well, pretty much everything right now (I've had a lot of painkillers).

But for everyone who has read this, left kudos or comments (and oh god the comments I cannot express how much they have meant to me), thank you SO MUCH. I am sorry to see the end of this arc because I like to draw things out for as long as is humanely possible (and because I have been using this fic as a form of extended therapy). But, it's ended, and I hope that the conclusion was...satisfying? I don't think that's the word. I don't think I can even use the word 'enjoy' without feeling a little guilty and inappropriate. Which is fitting, somehow.

Anyway! Here's the part where I invite you to say hi on tumblr (I am hoarding blogs right now but the most reliable one is http://muffichka.tumblr.com/). Also I might have accidentally bought a ticket to Red Dragon and if anyone is going and also wants to say hi (or wants to know how to give me a wide berth) then feel free to drop me a message! I am not nearly as horrible as my stories (I think).

These chapter notes are making me feel like the excitable drunk in the kitchen at a party so I'll wrap them up now, but thank you for reading this, wonderful humans.
x

Works inspired by this one

He Waits, In The Palace, Up Those Stairs by Hawkbringer

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!